

**POLITICAL SHIBBOLETHS: A STUDY OF RELIGIOUS RHETORICAL  
FORMS IN THE CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN PRESIDENCY**

A Dissertation

by

DAVID C. BAILEY

Submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2008

Major Subject: Communication

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## **ABSTRACT**

Political Shibboleths: A Study of Religious Rhetorical Forms

in the Contemporary American Presidency. (May 2008)

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From Jimmy Carter's self-identification as a "born again Christian" in the 1976 presidential campaign to George W. Bush's declaration of "Christ" as his favorite political philosopher "because he changed my heart" in a Republican primary debate of the 2000 campaign, presidential speeches and campaigns are often laced with religious language. Such an observation is nothing new. However, many scholars and political observers do not know what to make of such religious references. Such language is often dismissed as either shameless pandering to religious constituencies or something hopelessly out of place in American politics. This dissertation attempts a deeper analysis of this controversial subject by identifying how presidents use the rhetorical resources of religion by employing religious argument patterns stemming from the Jewish and Christian religious traditions in presidential speeches. Specifically, this dissertation explores how the last five presidents (Jimmy Carter through George W. Bush) have used such religious rhetorical forms in attempts to strike a symbolic chord within the larger American public. The religious rhetorical forms explored herein, if employed judiciously, can serve as political shibboleths—or passwords—which indicate a basic level of

identification with the public thanks to the basic elements, such as transformation, atonement, and renewal, which comprise the mythical core of these forms.

To my first debate coach Mr. Elwin Roe  
who taught me the enduring power of speech

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**CHAPTER I**

**INTRODUCTION: RELIGIOUS RHETORICAL PATTERNS**

**IN A POLITICAL WORLD**

“Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth: and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him, and slew him at the passages of the Jordan . . .”

Judges 12:6<sup>1</sup>

On December 13, 1999 Republican presidential hopefuls— Steve Forbes, George W. Bush, Gary Bauer, John McCain, Orrin Hatch, and Alan Keyes—gathered in Des Moines, Iowa at the Des Moines Civic Center to participate in the state’s only Republican presidential primary debate of the season. The nationally-televised contest exhibited all the characteristics of presidential primary debates including testy exchanges like the one between Governor Bush and Senator McCain about the role of soft money in elections, and Senator Hatch’s punchy one-liner comeback at multi-millionaire Steve Forbes who said that Hatch’s tax plan was really code for “hold onto your wallet”—“Steve, I couldn’t even lift your wallet.”<sup>2</sup>

Despite each candidate’s desire to strike a decisive blow early in the debate, the defining moment of this contest would come in the form of a surprising answer to an anonymously-posed question from the audience in the closing minutes. Veteran reporter John Bachman of Des Moines’s WHO-TV, who co-moderated the debate with NBC-TV’s Tom Brokaw, asked the candidates: “What political philosopher or thinker do you most

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<sup>1</sup>This dissertation follows the style of the journal *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*.

identify with and why?”<sup>3</sup> Steve Forbes and Alan Keyes offered John Locke and the founding fathers respectively as their primary political influences because of the important philosophical and political roles they played in the foundation of the American political structure. Bachman next directed the question to Governor Bush prompting the following exchange:

Bachman: “Governor Bush, a philosopher/thinker and why?”

Bush: “Christ. Because he changed my heart.”

Bachman: “I think that the viewer would like to know more on how he has changed your heart.”

Bush: “Well if they don’t know it’s going to be hard to explain. When you turn your heart and your life over to Christ—when you accept Christ as the Savior, it changes your heart, and changes your life. And that’s what happened to me.”<sup>4</sup>

The exchange drew significant applause from the immediate audience at the Des Moines Civic Center—including Orrin Hatch seated to Bush’s immediate left onstage that night. The reference also provoked imitation from Bush’s opponents as both Hatch and Gary Bauer included references to Christ and other overtly-Christian themes in their subsequent answers to the question.

The days and weeks following the debate would reveal that Bush’s answer resonated throughout the media and the electorate. His comments received extensive attention from many mainstream media commentators who were far less enthusiastic than the Iowa audience had been about the reference to Christ. Cokie and Steven Roberts used the reference to take Bush to task regarding his corporation-friendly, tax-cutting image; arguing that if Christ was indeed his favorite political philosopher, his policies should reflect Jesus’ warning “that it’s easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to achieve the kingdom of heaven . . .”<sup>5</sup> Jim Squires of *The Toronto Star* and Mary Dejevsky of *The (London) Independent* joined others in casting doubt upon

Bush's sincerity.<sup>6</sup> Squires suggested that Bush's comments did indeed reflect "an American religion . . . It's called marketing."<sup>7</sup> *The Washington Post's* Hanna Rosin was more sophisticated in her analysis, offering that Bush was "pioneering a more personal religious style in his courtship of evangelical votes. . . . Bush seeks to connect to his fellow born-again Christians 'from the heart,' as he likes to say."<sup>8</sup>

Religious leaders varied in their reactions to Bush's comments. Some such as Rabbi Abraham Foxman, national director of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith, and Episcopal Bishop C. Christopher Epting were troubled by the presence of such an overtly-religious reference in a political debate.<sup>9</sup> In contrast, other religious voters believed that Bush's reference to his personal experience with Christ did not go far enough. Mark Holbrook, president of the Evangelical Christian Credit Union, saw the reference to Christ as "a throwaway line . . . I was disappointed he didn't take the opportunity to personalize and internalize his faith."<sup>10</sup> Such sentiments were not shared by Dr. Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention. With more than 38,000 churches and 15 million members nationwide, the Southern Baptist Convention is the largest organized body of Protestant Christians in the United States.<sup>11</sup> Land, who watched the debate from his home in Nashville, Tennessee that evening recalled: "I was watching the debate with my wife and daughter in the room, neither of whom are political junkies. And when they heard that [Bush's] answer they both stopped what they were doing, looked at me and said 'Wow.'"<sup>12</sup> Bush's public pronouncement of his personal faith in such a political context obviously struck a raw nerve with some; but even more significantly, it struck a harmonious chord with others.

This dissertation examines the use of religion in the rhetoric of recent American presidents, seeking to explain how they employ religious themes as they attempt to navigate between the raw nerves and harmonious chords of the American audience. It investigates the extent to which religious history and culture in the United States provides presidents with the rhetorical resources—what historian John F. Wilson calls “religio-mythic materials”<sup>13</sup>—to strike such harmonious chords with the public and foster a sense of identification between themselves and the public. Most importantly, this dissertation investigates the extent to which these rhetorical resources manifest themselves as religious rhetorical forms—distinctive and recognizable patterns of discourse which emerge from America’s religious and intellectual history. In the case of George W. Bush, for instance, his reference to personal religious conversion was a noteworthy rhetorical and political occurrence in its own right. However, what made his expression of faith rhetorically powerful was not its uniqueness but, in a sense, its commonality to the religious conversion experiences of evangelical voters and the mythical appeal of the idea of personal transformation for those less inclined to view Bush’s statement through an exclusively religious prism.

### **Research Questions**

The guiding question behind this dissertation is: How do contemporary American presidents employ the rhetorical resources of religion when endeavoring to identify with the American public? Such a research question also prompts me to investigate whether or not presidents employ religion in ways other than those recognized by present scholarship? I posit that contemporary American presidents do indeed use religious rhetoric in a manner that has heretofore largely escaped the notice of scholars who

explore the rhetorical nexus of religion and politics. I call this approach religious rhetorical form. For instance, Bush's statement of faith was a truncated version of the Pauline conversion narrative—a rhetorical form with deep roots in Christian history and literature. While a fuller description of this form may be found in chapter VII of this dissertation, the Pauline conversion narrative is at its core a narrative of personal religious salvation modeled after the conversion accounts of the Apostle Paul found in the book of Acts in the New Testament of the Christian Bible.<sup>14</sup> As Ernest Bormann, Nathan Hatch, Perry Miller and others have demonstrated, the testimonial elements of this form became a rhetorical staple of the First Great Awakening and a particular favorite of the evangelical Protestant denominations whose ranks swelled during and after the Great Awakening.<sup>15</sup> The form remains popular in evangelical congregations even today. In a nation with more than 300,000 religious congregations<sup>16</sup> and where 46% of the population claims to have been “born again,” this religious rhetorical form can (as in the case of George W. Bush) have significant rhetorical and political effects.<sup>17</sup> I further posit that religious rhetorical forms such as the Pauline conversion narrative can, when used skillfully, enable presidents to strike symbolic chords within the public consciousness.

### **Shibboleth**

While religious rhetorical forms may be used to accomplish a number of presidential rhetorical and political objectives, I will explore how contemporary American presidents use religious rhetorical forms as American political shibboleths. That is to say that they employ such discursive patterns to establish themselves as leaders who can identify with the basic hopes and aspirations of the American people. A

shibboleth is a password. This metaphor is taken from the twelfth chapter of the book of *Judges*. As religious studies scholar Jo Ann Hackett of Harvard University explains, the term was used by the ancient Gileadites to distinguish themselves from their Ephraimite enemies who were attempting to escape to safety back across the Jordan after being defeated in battle: “Ephraimites who wanted to escape would simply claim not to be Ephraimites; the Gileadites discovered these impostors by having them pronounce the word [shibboleth] properly . . . The two dialects had different pronunciations for the same word . . .”<sup>18</sup>

Although an obscure military term from biblical history, the notion of certain messages acting as shibboleths has been noted by other scholars in both religious and political contexts.<sup>19</sup> Whether in religious or political contexts, shibboleths are ways of distinguishing group members from outsiders. While he does not use the term shibboleth, political scientist Matthew Moen finds that Ronald Reagan’s references to social issues such as abortion and school prayer in his state of the union messages increased significantly during election years—intended, Moen argues, to placate the Christian Right.<sup>20</sup> In their recent book *The God Strategy*, David Domke and Kevin Coe advance a similar thesis—that the proliferation of religious language by presidents and presidential candidates is a strategic way to win the support of narrowly-defined religious constituencies such as evangelicals.<sup>21</sup>

### **Identification and Consubstantiality**

While religious rhetoric can be and certainly is used to foster such narrow appeal, I argue that the use of religious forms enables presidents and presidential candidates to appeal to both narrowly-defined religious constituencies and the broader public thanks to

the mythical elements (the mythical core) of the rhetorical forms they use. Thus, in contrast to Moen, Domke, and Coe this dissertation suggests that recent presidents incorporate religion and religious rhetorical forms into their rhetoric to achieve a broader rhetorical purpose. Contemporary presidents use these forms largely as attempts to demonstrate their commonality with the wider public—not just evangelicals or the Christian Right. This not only has the potential to increase the effectiveness of their persuasive messages, it has the additional benefit of shaping the public's conceptions of them and their presidencies. Kenneth Burke referred to this important aspect of the persuasive process as “identification and consubstantiality.”<sup>22</sup> This project seeks to expand upon Burke's identification thesis by examining the degree to which identification and consubstantiality can occur at the communal rather than individual level as a result of the use of religious form. To do this, my dissertation will investigate the function of religious rhetorical form in presidential discourse, particularly the degree to which it may be used to demonstrate symbolic commonality with the public.

### **Religious Rhetorical Form**

Religious rhetorical forms occur within presidential rhetoric in far more variegated ways than generally recognized by many scholars. At present, much of the scholarship that focuses upon religious form in American political rhetoric focuses upon only one form—the American jeremiad. While, as will become apparent throughout this dissertation, the jeremiad remains a highly influential religious form, contemporary presidents can and do have an array of other rhetorical resources when it comes to form.

A second reason why the presence and variety of religious rhetorical form has not received a great deal of scholarly attention has to do with the fact that instances of form



are, I argue, often misconstrued as components of American civil religion. In 1967, sociologist Robert N. Bellah reintroduced the concept (which originally appeared in the writings of Jean Jacques Rousseau) to academic literature. After analyzing a series of presidential inaugurals, Bellah concluded that a civil religion existed in America. As Bellah put it:

Although matters of personal religious belief, worship, and association are considered to be strictly private affairs, there are, at the same time, certain common elements of religious orientation that the great majority of Americans share. These have played a crucial role in the development of American institutions and still provide a religious dimension to the whole fabric of American life, including the political sphere. This public religious dimension is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals, that I am calling American civil religion.<sup>23</sup>

While Bellah resists the characterization, his argument is predicated upon the use of religion as a descriptive metaphor for either American nationalism or belief in a series of principles which are understood to make up an American identity. Despite this relatively narrow conceptualization, civil religion has become the dominant descriptive term for occasions upon which religious rhetoric is incorporated into political discourse. While I do not deny the existence of civil religion in some manifestations of U. S. nationalism or as a valid theoretical perspective from which to understand religion in American public life, I do question whether all forms of religious rhetoric in political discourse are civil religious in nature. I posit that what is often called civil religious rhetoric, is in reality often the use of religious rhetorical form—a distinction which will be explored in more detail in chapter II of this dissertation.

The concept of rhetorical form is, naturally, an important theoretical and methodological concern in this dissertation. Before discussing this concept, it is important to distinguish rhetorical form from the concept of genre. A genre, to quote

literary critic Northrop Frye, “establishes the identity of a work of literature in two ways: it indicates what the work is, and it suggests the context of the work, by placing it within a number of works like it.”<sup>24</sup> Presidential inaugurals, for instance, illustrate these dual functions of genre. This definition of genre is reflected in the works of genre critics such as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson,<sup>25</sup> William L. Benoit, Joseph R. Blaney, and P.M. Pier,<sup>26</sup> Celest M. Condit,<sup>27</sup> and B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel<sup>28</sup> wherein the rhetorical situation determines the genre and the content of the discourse. Rhetorical form, on the other hand, is a recurrent pattern of argument which can appear in a variety of situations and is far less dependent upon the rhetorical situation. Although Campbell and Jamieson argue that genres are “constellation[s] of recognizable forms bound together by an internal dynamic,”<sup>29</sup> further inquiry into the potentially symbiotic relationship between the distinct elements of form and genre is required. What are rhetorical forms? How are they comprised? Why and how are rhetorical forms influential in political discourse? I will endeavor to answer these questions about rhetorical forms throughout this dissertation and, in so doing, help to clarify how genre and form are distinct.

I posit a tripartite definition of rhetorical form. I will begin by adopting rhetorical scholar Ernest Bormann’s notion that forms are “recurring patterns of discourse.”<sup>30</sup> Such discursive patterns manifest themselves as recurring narratives, argument patterns, metaphors, and the like. More recently, the work of rhetorical analyst Barry Brummett further develops Bormann’s idea. Brummett’s work *Rhetorical Homologies* explains the necessity of locating not just key words in a political text, but rhetorical patterns which bear a formal resemblance to patterns from a different discursive sphere. As Brummett

explains, a formal resemblance (or homology) is more than just a case where two different texts use a similar argument pattern; it is when the use of a pattern from one context “facilitates the work of political and social rhetoric, or influence” within another.<sup>31</sup> Just how religious rhetorical forms facilitate the work of presidential rhetoric will become apparent in the five case studies profiled herein.

However, it is not enough to simply identify patterns that transcend various discursive spheres; these patterns must also have an intellectual and cultural history to be properly considered a rhetorical form. Because my concern is with religious rhetorical forms, I will look to discursive patterns from the rich rhetorical storehouses of Christianity and Judaism as they have been employed throughout American cultural history. Examples of these include the American jeremiad as employed by Jimmy Carter (Chapter III) and Ronald Reagan (Chapter IV) and the deliverance theme as used by Bill Clinton (Chapter VI). The long cultural and religious history of these rhetorical forms enriches both their meaning-making potential and their inter-textuality.

Thirdly, rhetorical forms must somehow speak to the mythical needs of a rhetorically constituted public. As will become apparent in each of these case studies of presidential rhetoric, the religious forms employed by presidents are often reducible to a central essence—what I call a mythical core. While the religious form may itself be a shibboleth to those religious constituencies able to recognize it, the mythical core of a particular form is readily apparent to virtually any listener. As I will explain in chapter VI, religious voters certainly recognized the basic features of Bill Clinton’s use of the deliverance narrative during the 1992 campaign. However, the notion of national

renewal—the mythical core of the form as Clinton employed it—was apparent to the entire national audience whether religious or not.

In his germinal work *Counter-statement*, Kenneth Burke writes that “form is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite.”<sup>32</sup> As Burke proceeded to explain, “If, in a work of art, the poet says something, let us say, about a meeting, writes in such a way that we desire to observe that meeting, and then, if he places that meeting before us—that is form.”<sup>33</sup> Hence, the use of certain recurring patterns of religious discourse creates within a public an expectation or desire to hear and see the story played out in the way the form suggests. In the case of George W. Bush’s allusion to his own conversion during the Republican primary debate in 1999, the form of a sinner having been brought to repentance set the stage for his rhetorical management of the disclosure, just weeks before the 2000 election, of his 1976 arrest for driving while intoxicated. While the revelation undoubtedly broached questions in the minds of some voters about his character and the sincerity of his religious language, the Bush campaign’s allusions to Bush’s conversion experience in 1986 supplied a plausible response to the arrest grounded in the transformative elements of Bush’s faith. As Bush’s brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush put it, “Twenty-four years ago, my brother was a different person. . . . he wasn’t ready to be president”—the younger brother hastened to add that George W. had been “transformed” by his faith.<sup>34</sup> This case is one of many instances explored in this dissertation in which the use of religious rhetorical form appears to have enabled presidents to construct important identificational connections between themselves and the public.

This dissertation focuses upon the contemporary presidential era beginning with the administration of Jimmy Carter. The Carter presidency is the most logical place to begin this exploration for two reasons. First, Carter was distinct from his immediate predecessors in that he had a penchant for openly discussing his Christian faith and infusing religious language into his political decisions. Political scientists Andrew Flint and Joy Porter argue that, Carter almost single-handedly “reawakened faith-based politics” by bringing “the vocabulary of born-again salvation permanently into America’s political consciousness.”<sup>35</sup> While Carter was far from the first president to use religious appeals in his rhetoric,<sup>36</sup> he was more open about his personal religious faith than previous presidents. The religious discourse of previous presidents generally took the form of some type of civil religion; Carter broke this mold by proclaiming himself to have been “born again”—an intensely personal statement of religious faith which (like George W. Bush’s allusion to his conversion narrative) initially endeared him to many religious voters.<sup>37</sup> Second, beginning this investigation from the Carter administration forward permits me to examine five presidencies and nearly twenty-five years (1976-2000) of contemporary presidential rhetoric. This vantage point enables me to assess the degree to which religious rhetorical form is a characteristic of contemporary presidential rhetoric.

### **Review of Scholarship**

This investigation resides at the confluence of two streams of scholarship—the already vibrant literature on presidential rhetoric and the growing body of transdisciplinary literature exploring the intersection between religion and politics. Modern research into presidential persuasion began in 1960 with the publication of

political scientist Richard E. Neustadt's influential work *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership*. Neustadt argues that, in addition to the considerable executive powers of the office, presidents are able to wield "the power to persuade."<sup>38</sup> While Neustadt focuses primarily upon persuasion as manifested in negotiating power among governing elites, his interest in persuasion inspired subsequent studies of presidential rhetoric.

The study of presidential rhetoric took on renewed vigor in 1987 with the publication of Jeffrey K. Tulis' *The Rhetorical Presidency*. In addition to coining the phrase "the rhetorical presidency," Tulis argues that the character of presidential speechmaking had fundamentally changed since the administrations of Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson. Before Roosevelt and Wilson, Tulis explains, presidents were likely to direct their speeches principally toward the Congress when attempting to accomplish legislative and policy initiatives. Since Roosevelt and Wilson, the focus of presidential speeches dramatically shifted—presidential messages would hereafter be "addressed to the people at large" and rhetoric directed toward the public would "become a principal tool of presidential governance."<sup>39</sup> As such, scholars of presidential rhetoric seek to understand the persuasive and constitutive elements of presidential discourse.

In their oft-cited work *Deeds Done in Words*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson explore how the situational characteristics of presidential rhetorical genres influence the functions and effects of presidential rhetoric. In the case of presidential inaugurals, for instance, Campbell and Jamieson write that they "transcend the historical present by reconstituting an existing community, rehearsing the past, affirming traditional values, and articulating timely and timeless principles that will

govern the administration of the incoming president.”<sup>40</sup> In this way, presidential rhetoric is both persuasive—it has the power to change, reinforce, or otherwise alter public opinion; and constitutive—presidents have the power to shape the audience’s conception of itself, the president, or the nation.<sup>41</sup>

While an important touchstone for my dissertation, the genre approach of Campbell and Jamieson is distinct from this project because Campbell and Jamieson are interested in how a given situation (e.g. a presidential inaugural) influences the pattern of discourse used upon that occasion. In contrast, my dissertation posits that religious forms of discourse from America’s Christian and Jewish traditions are adapted for use in various political situations. Thus, the patterns explored in this study are not products of the various political situations in which they may be used, but are transcendent of them.

David Zarefsky’s analysis of Lyndon B. Johnson’s use of war metaphors in his anti-poverty initiative of 1964 also merits discussion in relation to this project because it illustrates the persuasive power of presidential rhetoric. Johnson’s open declaration of war on poverty in his 1964 State of the Union Address went on to become one of the rhetorical and political signatures of his administration. In particular, the war metaphor galvanized proponents of the bill in that “It defined the objective and encouraged enlistment in the effort, it identified the enemy against whom the campaign was directed, and it dictated the choice of weapons and tactics with which the struggle would be fought.”<sup>42</sup> Zarefsky’s analysis not only reveals the potential power of presidential rhetoric, it supports the notion that presidents and their advisors are constantly engaged in the process of seeking the right words which, in the right situations, will assist in the accomplishment of the administration’s objectives. Zarefsky’s work is an important

intellectual ancestor of my dissertation given its inquiry into religious rhetorical forms as both potential shibboleths and potentially valuable rhetorical tools of recent presidential administrations. Many scholars from political science and communication report that presidential rhetoric is potentially effective with regard to: its impact upon the American economy,<sup>43</sup> the framing of public policy choices for the electorate,<sup>44</sup> impact upon a president's public approval,<sup>45</sup> the power to define public issues,<sup>46</sup> the potential for a single speech to have a decisive effect upon an election,<sup>47</sup> and the potential utility (under certain circumstances) of televised foreign policy speeches<sup>48</sup> to name but a few areas of potential influence. While the breadth of scholarship in presidential rhetoric is quite impressive, much remains to be learned about how American presidents use religion in their rhetoric.

Although scholars from disciplines as diverse as literature, political science, history, and sociology had long recognized the influence of religion upon American politics,<sup>49</sup> communication scholars were, as Roderick P. Hart has noted, slower to explore this dynamic nexus.<sup>50</sup> This began to change in 1977 (the same year Jimmy Carter took office) with the publication of Roderick Hart's path breaking book *The Political Pulpit* and the beginning of Ernest Bormann's explorations of rhetorical forms and influential symbolic themes in the history of religious and political rhetoric. Using sociologist Robert N. Bellah's formulation of civil religion as his starting point, Hart argues that there is an extant "civic piety" in the United States—an unspoken contract between the government and organized religion stipulating guises of "complete separation" and "existential equality" between the two parties.<sup>51</sup> Additionally, Hart's contract stipulates that, while far from completely separate, government "will refrain from being overly religious" and religion "will refrain from being overly political."<sup>52</sup> While Hart's contract



metaphor and criticisms of Bellah's formulation of civil religion have been and will continue to be debated by scholars,<sup>53</sup> his most trenchant point of analysis is found in the important observation that "religion provides a wealth of symbolic force for political leaders who associate themselves with such forces."<sup>54</sup>

That same year, Ernest Bormann also turned his attention to religio-political rhetoric in an essay entitled "Fetching Good out of Evil" published in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. Bormann identified the "fetching good out of evil" motif as a rhetorical form a—"recurring pattern of discourse"—which exhibited remarkable influence in instances of religious and political rhetoric during periods of crisis such as the French and Indian War and the American Civil War.<sup>55</sup> The form, itself a subspecies of the influential jeremiad form often utilized by the Puritan ministers of the colonial era,<sup>56</sup> proclaimed that the community's current crisis was God's judgment for its collective sins. Redemption could be found if the community would recognize its sinfulness and work hard to correct its moral and spiritual deficiencies.<sup>57</sup> Bormann argues that Lincoln's renowned Second Inaugural Address utilized this form "to try to impel the North to continue the war to a successful conclusion . . ." and ultimately to "rebuild and restore a sense of national community after its destruction during that conflict."<sup>58</sup> In the years that followed, Bormann's work continued to highlight the existence of and potential rhetorical power of similar rhetorical forms and the religious ideas implicit to them.<sup>59</sup>

This stream of scholarship was further enriched in 1980 by Kurt Ritter's influential essay on the use of the jeremiad form in modern presidential nomination acceptance addresses. While the jeremiad had long been recognized as an important rhetorical form in Puritan and colonial America, Ritter argues that the form was alive and

well in the speeches of modern presidential candidates who “offer[ed] to lead the people through repentance back to their fundamental national values and, thereby, restore America to its former greatness.”<sup>60</sup> Hart, Bormann, and Ritter illustrate that religion and forms of religious discourse are important inventional sources for presidential speeches--they supply political rhetors with powerful symbolic elements quite useful in crafting effective suasy appeals.

The study of religious rhetoric in politics has been reinvigorated by a number of factors. The popular interest in apocalyptic prophecies surrounding the year 2000, the rhetorical responses to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the increasingly prominent role of religious rhetoric in the last two national political campaigns, and the manifestly religious rhetoric of President George W. Bush have all conspired to reignite scholarly interest in the topic.<sup>61</sup> This dissertation seeks to contribute to this important discussion by exploring the ways in which presidents use religious rhetorical forms as political shibboleths—passwords designed to help them accomplish rhetorical and political objectives and to create a sense of identification with the American public.

As previously noted the conjoined concepts of “identification and consubstantiality”<sup>62</sup> are central components of Burke’s broader concept of symbolic action. For Burke, human beings must use symbolic action in the form of rhetoric to transcend the differences inherent to their existence. Human beings are separated one from another by geography, socio-economic class, and by religion and politics. However, Burke argued that humans can use rhetoric to come together in unity. His explanation is worth quoting at some length:

Identification is compensatory to division. If men were not apart from one another, there would be no need for the rhetorician to proclaim their unity.

If men were wholly and truly of one substance, absolute communication would be man's very essence. It would not be an ideal, as it now is, . . . rather, it would be as natural, spontaneous, and total as with those ideal prototypes of communication, the theologian's angels, or 'messengers.'<sup>63</sup>

As Burke more succinctly put it, "Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall."<sup>64</sup> Seen from this perspective, one primary function of political rhetoric is to transcend the differences inherent to large national audiences and create a sense of unity by upholding commonly-held virtues and ideals. This goal of political rhetoric has been noted by Campbell and Jamieson who argue that one of the objectives of presidential inaugurals is to "unif[y] the audience by reconstituting its members as the people . . ."<sup>65</sup>

Consubstantiality—the point where the receiver of the message has become convinced that the sender is like him or her—is the ultimate goal of suasy communication according to Burke. As he explained, "To identify A with B is to make A 'consubstantial' with B."<sup>66</sup> Obviously, there is much persuasive value in A becoming convinced that he or she is of the same substance as B. One sees much evidence of consubstantiality taking place in those who identify with the religious tone and form of George W. Bush's presidential campaign rhetoric. As previously noted, evangelical leaders such as Richard Land are quite impressed with Bush's religious vocabulary: "I think that there's no question that this president expresses his faith in overtly evangelical terms in a way that is much more recognizable, much more identifiable as being quote, 'one of us' than the presidents that I've known in my lifetime."<sup>67</sup> Land is clearly not alone in this sentiment. Exit poll results compiled by the Cable News Network (CNN) indicate that Bush was favored by "white evangelicals" who consider themselves "born again" by 78% to only 21% for Senator John Kerry.<sup>68</sup> The findings of such exit polls (while sometimes deemed unreliable) appear to be confirmed by the 2004 Religion and Politics

Post-Election Survey which found that “the groups that voted for Bush also approved of a strong role for religion in the process and report that it played a vital role in their decision.”<sup>69</sup> While party affiliations and issue positions certainly played significant roles in candidate choice, there can be little doubt that Bush’s use of religious rhetoric helped enable him to mobilize a core constituency.

There is also evidence to suggest that Bush’s use of religious rhetoric may have struck harmonious chords even among those disinclined to support him. In his recent book *God’s Politics*, liberal evangelical author Jim Wallis tells of an elderly West Virginia voter who was “more conflicted than ever” about choosing a candidate in 2004.<sup>70</sup> Wallis explained that while she had serious reservations about the war in Iraq and Bush’s economic policy, “she said, she liked the way he talks about his Christianity and brings his faith into what he’s doing.”<sup>71</sup> Senator Robert Byrd of West Virginia, known to be an outspoken critic of the Bush administration, has admitted that in spite of his opposition to many of Bush’s policies he is “moved by his [Bush’s] reference to the Scriptures.”<sup>72</sup> In short, these accounts and statistics suggest that Bush’s religious appeals appear to effect his perception among the public. This study will attempt to determine both the degree to which identification and consubstantiality result from presidential use of religious rhetorical forms, and how religious rhetorical forms may foster this identification.

### **Outline of Chapters**

The case studies examined in this dissertation are those which illustrate most clearly the potential use of certain religious rhetorical forms as political shibboleths. Chapter II will initiate this effort by outlining religious rhetorical form as a theoretical

and methodological approach distinct from both civil religion as defined by Robert Bellah and Roderick Hart's notion of a contract of civic piety. This comparison is necessary because it will establish the utility of religious rhetorical form as an approach to understanding religious rhetoric in presidential discourse.

Chapter III explores how President Jimmy Carter utilized the jeremiad to address America's energy crisis of the late 1970s. In contrast to other studies which focus solely upon Carter's energy jeremiad as manifested in his infamous "malaise speech," I explore all of Carter's major energy speeches in order to note the increasingly moralistic trajectory of his messages. This chapter paints a revealing, and often painful, picture of an American president (and a good man) acting as a socio-political and cultural prophet. Although Carter was widely respected for his personal humility and the strength of his convictions, a series of rhetorical and political missteps undermined his use of the jeremiad as a political shibboleth.

Chapter IV also examines the jeremiad but looks to President Ronald Reagan's increasingly optimistic use of the form throughout his presidency in relation to the state of the American economy. From his first inaugural address to his farewell, Reagan adapted the traditionally judgmental and moralistic character of the Puritan rhetorical form to make it far more palatable to a 1980s American audience. The economy was in trouble not because the people had sinned, but because they had been led astray by the false prophets of collectivism. In contrast to Carter, Reagan's jeremiad was postmillennial in its orientation—continually expressing the belief that the American economy could and would improve by hard work and renewed faithfulness to the belief in limited government which (in Reagan's view) had made America great. Reagan's use

of the jeremiad form throughout the 1980 campaign and his administration was far gentler, more inclusive, and far less faithful to the Puritan jeremiad than Carter's had been. Not surprisingly, Reagan's version of the form was much better received by the public. Their diverse uses of the jeremiad form may illustrate both the remarkable adaptability of such forms and that such shibboleths may either help or hinder an administration or campaign.

Although President George H. W. Bush is often marginalized by rhetorical analysts because of his well documented disdain for rhetoric, his use of the atonement form reflects the tendency of contemporary presidents to use religious rhetorical forms. Chapter V analyzes Bush's use of the atonement form throughout the Persian Gulf War of 1991. Prior to the war, Bush used the form to suggest, on numerous occasions, that any war in the Persian Gulf would not be another Vietnam. At the end of the conflict, Bush employed the form in order to maintain that America's success in expelling Saddam Hussein's military forces from Kuwait had ended the "Vietnam syndrome" and the lingering effects of it. The national redemption enacted by Bush was quite short-lived. He soon found his ability to respond to the humanitarian crises in Iraq following the war had been severely hampered by his continual pledges to avoid another Vietnam-style conflict.

Chapter VI discusses President Bill Clinton's use of deliverance form throughout his presidential campaign and his administration. Clinton entered the race for the presidency in 1992 promising to renew America's economic and political promise. While some scholars have argued that Clinton's campaign rhetoric is reflective of a political jeremiad,<sup>73</sup> this chapter argues that Clinton's rhetoric had far more in common with the deliverance prophets of ancient Israel who promised that divine national restoration was

at hand. Such a distinction is quite important to the study of rhetorical forms as they operate within religious political discourse. This chapter demonstrates that while prophetic forms of discourse do indeed play an important role in American discourse, there is a greater variety of prophetic rhetorical form than what has been recognized by rhetorical scholarship to date. In short, this chapter illustrates a degree of complexity about prophetic religious rhetorical form in presidential rhetoric which is yet to be widely recognized.

Chapter VII investigates President George W. Bush's use of the Pauline conversion narrative throughout his 2000 campaign discourse, but particularly in his campaign biography *A Charge to Keep*. In this chapter I argue that the Bush campaign modified Bush's own religious conversion experience to fit more closely the requirements of the Pauline form. This modification had a number of rhetorical and political benefits for Bush since it enabled him to create a sense of consubstantiality with evangelical voters, enabled him to declare his previous personal transgressions out of bounds for public scrutiny, and allowed him to name the Reverend Billy Graham as his sole spiritual mentor when in fact he was not. By noting these benefits I do not mean to imply that Bush's religious conversion was not genuine. However, I concur with former Bush administration insider David Kuo who notes that "George W. Bush's religious orientation was the most carefully controlled aspect of his public image."<sup>74</sup> Bush's use of the Pauline conversion form enabled him to satisfactorily manage his public image in such a way as to appear consubstantial with evangelicals while maintaining the image of a "compassionate conservative."

Finally, in chapter VIII, I discuss the rhetorical and democratic implications of the vigorous emergence of religious form in presidential discourse. I will offer some normative observations of the phenomenon and cautiously evaluate the future prospects of religious rhetoric as a political shibboleth in America.

This dissertation will certainly not address every element of the confluence of religious and political rhetoric; but this study will provide a valuable contribution to our current understanding of this important rhetorical and political phenomenon.

### Notes

1. Judges 12: 6, King James Version.
2. Bennett Roth, and Clay Robison, "Bush, McCain Mix it up During Iowa GOP Debate," *Houston Chronicle* December 14, 1999, A1.
3. Public Broadcasting Service, "The Jesus Factor." *Frontline*. 2004. (Hereafter cited as "The Jesus Factor.")
4. "The Jesus Factor."
5. Cokie Roberts, and Steven Roberts, "Jesus, The Political Philosopher," *Times Picayune (New Orleans)* December 23, 1999, Metro 7B.
6. Mary Dejevsky, "Dark Suits and Christ Fail to Give Bush the Edge," *Independent (London)* December 15, 1999, Foreign News, p. 15.; Jim Squires, "U.S. Candidates Call on God to Grab Votes," *Toronto Star* December 26, 1999, 1. For additional criticism of Bush's comments see Zoe Heller, "U.S. Politicians Wear Their Faith on Their Sleeve: An Underlying Assumption in the Presidential Campaign Seems to be that Discussing Religion Gives Voters Insight into the Candidates' Politics," *Ottawa Citizen* December 18, 1999, E16.
7. Squires, "U.S. Candidates Call on God," 1.
8. Hanna Rosin, "Bush's 'Christ Moment' is Put to Political Test by Christians; Act of Faith or Partisan Ploy, It Draw's Faithful's Attention," *Washington Post* December 16, 1999, A 14.
9. Richard L. Berke, "Religion Center Stage in Presidential Race," *New York Times* December 15, 1999, A20 column 1.
10. Quoted in Rosin, "Bush's 'Christ Moment,'" A14.
11. Carl L. Kell, and L. Raymond Camp, *In the Name of the Father: The Rhetoric of the New Southern Baptist Convention*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999), 1. See also Jesse C. Fletcher, *The Southern Baptist Convention: A Sesquicentennial History*, (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 1.
12. Quoted in Rosin, "Bush's 'Christ Moment,'" A14.



13. John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1979), 43.
14. Ernest G. Bormann, *The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream*, (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press., 2001), 7.
15. Bormann, *The Force of Fantasy*, 86-87; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 9-11. Perry Miller recorded the conversion narrative of Thomas Shepard, a Puritan minister who used the form in the mid seventeenth century—indicating that it predates the Great Awakening. See Perry Miller, *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 226-230.
16. Mark Chavez, *Congregations in America*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3.
17. Quoted in “The Jesus Factor.”
18. Jo Ann Hackett, “Shibboleth,” in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 693.
19. Recent works have used the “shibboleth” metaphor to refer to religious and political passwords. See Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), and Craig A. Smith, “The Jeremiadic Logic of Bill Clinton’s Policy Speeches,” In Stephen A. Smith (Ed.), *Bill Clinton on Stump, State, and Stage: The Rhetorical Road to the White House*, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 84.
20. Matthew C. Moen, “The Political Agenda of Ronald Reagan: A Content Analysis of the State of the Union Messages,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 18 (1988): 779; Matthew C. Moen, “Ronald Reagan and the Social Issues: Rhetorical Support for the Christian Right,” *The Social Science Journal* 27 (1990), 202.
21. See David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 11-22, 76-80.
22. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 20.
23. Robert N. Bellah, “Civil Religion in America,” *Daedalus* 96 (1967): 1-21.
24. Northrop Frye, “Framework and Assumption,” in *Northrop Frye Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988* ed. Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1996), 79.
25. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Genres of Governance*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990).
26. William L. Benoit, Joseph R. Blaney, and P. M. Pier, “Acclaiming, Attacking, and Defending: A Functional Analysis of Nominating Convention Keynote Speeches, 1960-1996,” *Political Communication* 17 (2000): 61-84.
27. Celest M. Condit, “The Function of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar,” *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 298-310.
28. B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, “The Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*. 59 (1973): 273-283.
29. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction,” in *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action*, ed. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church: The Speech Communication Association, 1978), 21.

30. Ernest G. Bormann, "Fetching Good out of Evil," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63 (1977), 130.
31. Barry Brummett, *Rhetorical Homologies: Form, Culture, Experience* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 3.
32. Kenneth Burke, *Counter-Statement*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 31.
33. Burke, *Counter-Statement*., 31.
34. "Jeb Bush Defends Brother on TV." *St. Petersburg Times*, November 6, 2000, 7A.
35. Andrew R. Flint, and Joy Porter, "Jimmy Carter: The Re-emergence of Faith-Based Politics and the Abortion Rights Issue," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35 (2005): 28, 48.
36. Scholars from various disciplines have recognized the presence of religious language in historical presidential discourse. While none of these studies conceptualize such language as religious rhetorical form, they illustrate the pervasiveness of religion in presidential speech. A few examples include: Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 1-21.; Richard V. Pierard, and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie Books, 1988); and Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture*.
37. On this point, Flint and Porter correctly observe that Carter's religious rhetoric enabled him to gain the initial support of religious conservatives. However, many of these same voters became disenchanted with Carter's moderate/liberal politics regarding issues such as abortion and school prayer and turned to Ronald Reagan in the 1980 campaign. Flint and Porter, "Jimmy Carter," 47. See also Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 254.
38. Richard E. Neustadt, *Presidential Power: The Politics of Leadership* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960), 33-57.
39. Jeffrey K. Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 4, 133.
40. Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words*, 27.
41. Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words*, 6.
42. David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 29.
43. B. Dan Wood, "Presidential Rhetoric and Economic Leadership," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34 (2004): 573-606. See also B. Dan Wood, Chris T. Owens, and Brandy M. Durham, "Presidential Rhetoric and the Economy," *The Journal of Politics* 67 (2005): 627-645.
44. Thomas E. Nelson, "Policy Goals, Public Rhetoric, and Political Attitudes," *The Journal of Politics* 66 (2004): 581-605.
45. James N. Druckman, and Justin W. Holmes, "Does Presidential Rhetoric Matter?: Priming and Presidential Approval," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34 (2004): 755-778.
46. David Zarefsky, "Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34 (2004): 607-619.
47. Martin J. Medhurst, "Text and Context in the 1952 Presidential Campaign: Eisenhower's 'I shall go to Korea' Speech," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 30 (2000): 464-484.
48. Reed L. Welch, "Was Reagan Really a Great Communicator?: The Influence of Televised Addresses on Public Opinion," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 33 (2003): 853-876.

49. While the work of Kenneth Burke is claimed by disciplines throughout the academic world, his position as a literary critic suggests that he is most accurately categorized among literary and rhetorical scholars regarding his exploration of the rhetorical power of religion. See Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970). From political science see Bernard F. Donahue, "The Political Use of Religious Symbols: A Case Study of the 1972 Presidential Campaign," *The Review of Politics* 37 (1975): 48-65. From history see Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984); Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*; Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978) and John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture*.

50. Roderick P. Hart and John L. Pauley II, *The Political Pulpit Revisited* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005), 183.

51. Roderick P. Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1977), 44.

52. Hart, *The Political Pulpit*, 44.

53. Critical responses to Hart's contract metaphor may be found in unit three of *The Political Pulpit Revisited*. (pp. 93-161). These responses were also published in a special issue of the *Journal of Communication and Religion* (vol. 25 number 1, March 2002).

54. Hart, *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 21.

55. Bormann, "Fetching Good out of Evil," 130-139.

56. For a description of the jeremiad see Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness*, and Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*.

57. Bormann, "Fetching Good out of Evil," 132.

58. Bormann, "Fetching Good out of Evil," 139.

59. Bormann creates a veritable laundry list of influential religious forms from American history including: "Christian solider," "God's chosen people," "Pauline conversion," "new birth," "restoration," and "quest" to name a few. See Bormann, *The Force of Fantasy*, 42-45, 49, 53, 80, 81, 86-94, 134, 219, 229.

60. Kurt W. Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition: Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses 1960-1976," *Central States Speech Journal* 31 (1980): 159.

61. This renewed interest in religious form in contemporary presidential rhetoric can be seen in Denise M. Bostdorff, "George W. Bush's Post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 293; John M. Murphy, "'Our Mission and Our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11<sup>th</sup>," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 611. For more on the use of religious rhetoric in recent political campaigns see Martin J. Medhurst, "Religious Rhetoric and the Ethos of Democracy: A Case Study of the 2000 Presidential Campaign," in *The Ethos of Rhetoric* ed. Michael J. Hyde (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 114-135. A recent spate of popular books exploring the role of religion and faith in American politics attests to a growing public fascination with such topic as well. Some examples include: David Aikman, *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004); Madeline Albright, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2006); Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, (New York: Penguin Group USA, 2003); Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, The Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006); Jim Wallis, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get it* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers. 2005).

62. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 20.
63. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 22.
64. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 23.
65. Campbell and Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words*, 15.
66. Burke, *Rhetoric of Motives*, 21.
67. "The Jesus Factor."
68. "CNN Campaign 2004 Exit Poll Results, November 2, 2004," <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/> (accessed November 4, 2004).
69. James L. Guth, Lyman A. Kellstedt, Corwin E. Smidt, and John C. Green, "Religious Influences in the 2004 Presidential Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (2006): 233.
70. Wallis, *God's Politics*, 8.
71. Wallis, *God's Politics*, 8.
72. "Byrd: Last Chapter Isn't Written Yet: Democrat Reflects on 48 Years in Senate, Hopes for 9<sup>th</sup> Term, June 12, 2006," <http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/06/12/byrd.access/index.htm> (accessed August 30, 2006).
73. See David E. Procter and Kurt Ritter, "Inaugurating the Clinton Presidency: Regenerative Rhetoric and the American Community," in *The Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues, and Communication Strategies* ed. Robert E. Denton, and Rachel L. Holloway (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 1-16; and Smith, "The Jeremiadic Logic of Bill Clinton's Policy Speeches," 73-100.
74. David Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 123.

## CHAPTER II

### RECONSIDERING RELIGIOUS RHETORIC IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: CIVIL RELIGION, CIVIC PIETY, OR RELIGIOUS RHETORICAL FORM?

While attempting to sketch the contours of the ideal political state in his 1762 work *Of the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right* Jean-Jacques Rousseau boldly asserts in Chapter Eight of Book IV that “no state has ever been founded without religion serving as its base. . . .”<sup>1</sup> A few lines later Rousseau explains that the religion to which he refers is not any particular spiritual religion, but “that of the Citizen.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the chapter Rousseau extols the virtues of this citizen’s religion; the chief aims of which are the promotion of political stability and good citizenship via agreement on what he calls the “dogmas of civil religion” which included: “The existence of the powerful, intelligent and beneficent, prescient, and provident Divinity, the life to come, the happiness of the just, the punishment of the wicked, the sanctity of the social contract and the laws . . .”<sup>3</sup> In writing these words Rousseau not only coined the phrase civil religion but offered the germ of a new theoretical perspective from which to study how the state and religion interact. At its core, Rousseau’s concept consists of three elements: (1) every political society has as its foundation an extant civil religion which promotes good citizenship at the individual level and political stability for the ruling regime, (2) civil religion entails the veneration of the values, laws and institutions of the state, and (3) an explicit rejection of any actual religion as an adequate basis for a civil society.

In a sense, Rousseau's observation about a vibrant religious component in political society was nothing new. Scholars from Plato to the contemporary era have recognized important connections between religion and politics. In 1835 French aristocrat turned accomplished social observer Alexis de Tocqueville commented at length about the sociological and political functions of American religion. Among his discoveries Tocqueville specifically cites: ministers willing to engage political topics from their pulpits, elected politicians who recognized the political utility of religious denominations and consequently tried to avoid offending them, and even a New York court case wherein a witness' testimony was ultimately dismissed because he declared himself an atheist.<sup>4</sup> These observations led him to conclude that in spite of constitutionally-imposed religious disestablishment "from the beginning, politics and religion [in America] contracted an alliance which has never been dissolved."<sup>5</sup> Tocqueville is even more specific a few pages later when he suggests that despite Rousseau's insistence to the contrary, Christianity in the American case may have formed much of the basis of an American civil faith: "The Americans combine notions of Christianity and of liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other. . . ."<sup>6</sup> Efforts like these have resulted in a corpulent body of literature and a dizzying array of theoretical explanations of the phenomenon of religion and politics in general, and of religious political rhetoric in particular.

Rather than review the entire intellectual corpus on the relationship between religion and politics, this chapter confines itself to a comparison of three contemporary theoretical and methodological approaches to understanding the dynamic discursive relationship between religion and politics—American civil religion, the contract of civic

piety, and religious rhetorical form. Focusing upon these three approaches allows for an expansive, but detailed, view of how the scholarly community presently understands the subject of religious rhetoric as it pertains to American political discourse.

Of these three, American civil religion has become the dominant, if not altogether unified, contemporary theoretical construct. Despite its value in helping interpret political texts which reference transcendent values inherent to civil religion and the prominence of the civil religion construct in contemporary literature, civil religion alone fails to provide a satisfactory theoretical account of presidential uses of religious rhetoric. This is particularly true in contemporary presidential communication where figures such as Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush use very personal religious references by discussing their own religious conversions.

Roderick Hart's formulation of a contract of civic piety also informs much of our present understanding of religious political rhetoric. While the particulars of the contract will be discussed later in this chapter, Hart's view of religious rhetoric in political discourse is more instrumental than Bellah's because he argues (quite correctly) that religion is a powerful rhetorical tool for those political figures who must enlist either active or tacit public support in order to govern. Hart's contract (itself an interesting rhetorical artifact) stipulates that guises of complete separation and existential equality exist between the two parties—the government will remain in its realm, mainstream religion will remain active only rhetorically.<sup>7</sup> Moreover the government agrees to refrain from being overly religious and mainstream religion will refrain from being overly political while neither party will divulge the details of the contract. Although students of political rhetoric have often noted the dangers of candidates appearing to be too religious,

the rhetorical presidencies of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and George W. Bush who each employed religious rhetoric quite frequently indicate that perhaps the term of the contract have changed. Although the contract of civic piety has not received the same degree of scholarly attention as Bellah's civil religion, it too has shaped much of the discussion in our discipline regarding this dynamic area of scholarship—so much so that the *Journal of Communication and Religion* dedicated a whole issue to the discussion of Hart's thesis in 2002 and Hart's book *The Political Pulpit* was expanded and republished in 2005. Like civil religion, the contract of civic piety is unable to account for the presence of well-documented patterns of religious discourse, such as the jeremiad, which continue to emerge in American political discourse. I am not suggesting that either civil religion or the contract of civic piety fail to help us understand the religious discourse to be found in some instances of presidential rhetoric; however, I do posit that the theoretical construct of religious rhetorical form—which I introduced in the previous chapter—is an important dimension of how contemporary presidents use religious rhetoric, and is therefore a fruitful alternative methodological tool for conducting rhetorical analyses of contemporary presidential rhetoric. Additionally, this chapter will demonstrate how the religious rhetorical form construct provides a deeper conceptual understanding of the potential effectiveness of such presidential rhetoric, and how it is blessed with more conceptual clarity than either the civil religion or civic piety constructs. The most effective way to proceed is to review the literatures of both civil religion and civic piety and note several conceptual problems with their respective applications to rhetorical analysis of contemporary religious presidential rhetoric. Next, I will review the tenets of the religious rhetorical form construct and end by considering



several brief examples of presidential rhetoric which illustrate the utility of the rhetorical form construct.

### **American Civil Religion**

As Rousseau himself acknowledged in *The Social Contract*, the idea of civil religion is not without historical pedigree. In 399 B.C.E. Socrates was brought to trial in Athens on charges of impiety toward the gods and corruption of the city's youth. Although his true crime was philosophy by way of dialectic, Socrates' accusers convinced the assembly of jurors that his teachings were injurious to their religion—and therefore the state.<sup>8</sup> The practice of a civil religion was even more influential in ancient Rome. From the vestal virgins who were the keepers of the sacred flame of Rome to the official title of its emperors—*pontifex maximus* (literally “chief preist”)—Roman religion was corporate, communal, and above all political. Roman religion afforded the political value of stability thanks in no small part to its malleability—a trait it shares with modern conceptions of civil religion.<sup>9</sup> For both of these powerful ancient cultures such loosely-defined but strictly-enforced civic creeds were not just attractive ideas, but “the social glue of [the] ideal state.”<sup>10</sup> Religious historian Sydney Ahlstrom writes that the worldview of America's early colonists was profoundly shaped by what he considers to be civil religious rhetorical themes of “mission, an abundant land, a noble hero, and a favoring Providence.”<sup>11</sup> While the themes Ahlstrom highlights may be more accurately termed instances of religious rhetorical form, his assertion illustrates the degree to which the civil religion construct has permeated current scholarship and the interpretation of American rhetorical history. While there can be little doubt that a civil religion existed in ancient Greece and Rome, and at various points throughout human history when church

and state were virtually identical (as in the early Puritan settlements in America), one may reasonably question the degree to which civil religion remains a viable theoretical construct in modern American presidential rhetoric. To engage this question, we must turn to a transdisciplinary review of the contemporary civil religion literature.

In 1967 sociologist Robert N. Bellah revived Rousseau's terminology in an oft-cited and reprinted article entitled "Civil Religion in America" published in the journal *Daedalus*. Bellah posits that the appearance of religious themes such as "Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, and Sacrificial Death and Rebirth" in rhetorical sites such as presidential inaugurals and founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence point to the existence of a distinctive "national cult" which he called "civil religion."<sup>12</sup> As Bellah famously insisted: "The existence of this highest level of religious symbolism in the political life of the republic justifies the assertion that there is a civil religion in America"<sup>13</sup>

Although Bellah is sometimes credited with single-handedly reintroducing civil religion, his seminal article was part of a larger theory-building dialogue Bellah himself helped reignite among historians and sociologists concerning religion in public life—a discussion which reached its zenith in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>14</sup> These discussions ultimately produced five distinct conceptualizations of American civil religion: folk religion, transcendental universal religion of the nation, religious nationalism, democratic faith, and Protestant civic piety.<sup>15</sup> An entire book-length study could easily be devoted to highlighting the similarities and differences of each conceptualization along with their respective strengths and weaknesses. However, this analysis focuses upon the variety of

civil religion most consistently applied in the literature on presidential rhetoric—the notion that civil religion exists as a transcendent universal religion of the nation.

Bellah's work—which fits squarely within the transcendental universal religion of the nation conceptualization—was based largely upon religious historian Sidney Mead's contention that Americans (en masse) have practiced both a trans-denominational Protestant orthodoxy and a “religion of the democratic society and nation” since the nineteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Mead argues that this religion “was articulated in terms of the destiny of America, under God, to be fulfilled by perfecting the democratic way of life for the example and betterment of mankind.”<sup>17</sup> In Mead's (and later Bellah's) conceptualization, American civil religion was both particular to America in regard to its covenantal responsibility to promote values such as freedom and democracy around the world and universal in light of its assumption of a universal Deity to whom the nation would be held accountable. As Martin E. Marty explains, the other four conceptions of civil religion would be “faiths for the part, while it [the universal transcendent civil religion] would be a faith for the whole.”<sup>18</sup> Mead flatly rejects the notion that civil religion is simply a form of American nationalism. After quoting lengthy passages from the likes of presidents Madison, Lincoln, and Eisenhower and Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas he opines: “How can anyone suppose that Madison and Lincoln and Douglas and Eisenhower in these representative pronouncements represented an idolatrous worship of the nation, or the civil state, or of ‘the American Way of Life’?”<sup>19</sup>

The term American civil religion appears at times to elude specific definition. This observation is not intended to diminish the scholarship of Robert Bellah or that of any other of its proponents, but to simply recognize the lack of conceptual clarity that

accompanies it. Throughout his writings Bellah defines American civil religion in several different ways. In his original essay Bellah defined the concept in distinctively Durkheimian terms as “a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity.”<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere Bellah defines American civil religion as “that religious dimension, found . . . in the life of every people, through which it interprets its historical experience in the light of transcendent reality.”<sup>21</sup> In 1980, Bellah produced a third definition with an even more explicitly religious metaphor: “the worship of a higher reality that upholds the standards the republic attempts to embody.”<sup>22</sup>

While his definition of the concept has evolved—morphing from symbolic to religious terms—Bellah’s view can be distilled into three central premises. First, American civil religion is an attempt to communicate and account for America’s role in a larger transcendent reality. For instance, in his 1975 work *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial*, Bellah resembles a modern-day prophet chastising Americans for sins such as promoting a violent and intolerant culture. His passionate conclusion to the book clearly illustrates the depth of his convictions about America and its civil religion:

We certainly need a new ‘Great Awakening.’ The inward reform of conversion, the renewal of an inward covenant among the remnant that remains faithful to the hope for rebirth, is more necessary than it has ever been in America. The great experiment may fail utterly, and such failure will have dark consequences not only for Americans but for all the world. . . . One of the tenets of the early Puritans that we could well remember is that the millennium is brought by God, not man. . . . We do not know what the future holds and we must give up the illusion that we control it, for we know that it depends not only on our action but on grace. While recognizing the reality of death, we may return finally to Winthrop’s biblical injunction: Let us choose life.<sup>23</sup>

It is small wonder that Edwin S. Gaustad called this work a “jeremiad with footnotes.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Bellah’s conceptualization is deeply grounded as much in his personal faith as in his theoretical description of empirical realities. While one can certainly admire the conviction with which Bellah writes, conceiving of civil religion in this way introduces a host of theoretical and methodological problems which will be addressed later in this chapter.

Scholars who embrace the transcendent universal religion of the nation conceptualization see its broad political institutionalization as the second major characteristic of civil religion. Following the influence of Sidney Mead, Bellah and other proponents of the theory find evidence for civil religion in the speeches of presidents,<sup>25</sup> Madison’s writings about the Constitution,<sup>26</sup> sermons and religious services,<sup>27</sup> and even America’s bicentennial celebration in 1976.<sup>28</sup> As noted earlier, the presence of Biblical archetypes such as “Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem . . .” to name a few are taken as evidence of an extant civil religion.<sup>29</sup> These studies clearly illustrate that America’s public religious consciousness is deep and wide; but can it rightly be called an institutionalized public religion? Is it a coherent, unified, and universal religion of the nation, or are the rhetors in each of these studies using stock metaphors, images, and patterns of religious discourse to add greater persuasive force to their rhetoric? Precisely what is it that has become institutionalized?

Like Rousseau, Bellah’s civil religion (if properly practiced) is assumed to have the effect of promoting responsible citizenship at the individual level and legitimizing the authority of the civil government at the communal level.<sup>30</sup> This can only be the case however if the civil religion upholds and venerates the ideal principles of the state—those

which the state uses to define both good citizenship and its own identity. This third major element of civil religion comes through most clearly in *Habits of the Heart* wherein Bellah and colleagues discuss the union of Biblical rhetoric to republican ideals. While the term civil religion is never used in this book, the authors specifically cite Martin Luther King Jr. as the quintessential example of such a union between religious rhetoric and political ideals. As they explain:

King's articulation of the biblical and republican strands of our national history enabled a large number of Americans, black and white, to recognize their real relatedness across difference. King characterized legal disenfranchisement, poverty, and unemployment as institutionalized denials of personal dignity and social participation—glaring failures of collective national responsibility.<sup>31</sup>

In the case of King, he was acting as prophetic spokesperson for principles such as justice, inclusion, and equal protection under the law—principles synonymous with the laws of “nature’s God” as propounded in the Declaration of Independence. Thus, we see that any viable civil religion must promote the ideal principles of the state. Indeed, as a number of political science scholars have noted, this is likely the primary reason for the existence of civil religion in any society in the first place.<sup>32</sup> Perhaps the clearest parallel between Bellah’s civil religion and the contemporary presidency can be found in the way American presidents often attempt to use religious rhetoric to venerate ideals such as freedom. As we will see later in this chapter, such occasions also illustrate how the civil religion and rhetorical form constructs work together at times to produce powerful political discourse.

Bellah and other proponents of civil religion often argue that the fourth element of American civil religion is that it is inherently nonsectarian. They seem to want to argue as Rousseau did that established religions are themselves inadequate to the task of unifying

an entire nation. While perhaps an appropriate feature for a “religion of the nation,” it should be noted that the Biblical archetypes which, according to Bellah, under gird the nonsectarian civil religion—“Exodus, Chosen People, Promised Land, New Jerusalem, Sacrificial Death and Rebirth”—all appear to emerge from either the Jewish or Christian traditions. As such, it may well be asked: how truly nonsectarian is American civil religion?

American civil religion has become the dominant theoretical explanation of the intersection of religion and politics. In Bellah’s home discipline of sociology, the concept has generated interest and contentious debate among an entire generation of sociologists. At the theoretical level, John A. Coleman and Gail Gehrig have contributed to the civil religion literature by endeavoring to define elements of Bellah’s original work more precisely.<sup>33</sup> Coleman considers civil religion to be “the set of beliefs, rites, and symbols which relates a man’s role as citizen and his society’s place in space, time, and history to the conditions of ultimate existence and meaning.”<sup>34</sup> This definition shifts the focal point of the construct from a transcendent universal covenant toward a symbolization system able to legitimize the extant political structure and promote the values of a given society. This finding neatly dovetails with those of Gehrig who suggests that modern American civil religion performs integrative, legitimating, and prophetic roles.<sup>35</sup> Thus, while the transcendent and universal elements of Bellah’s civil religion have not been specifically repudiated by scholars, most studies now conceptualize civil religion in terms of its symbolic import—particularly in light of its priestly (one who speaks to the Almighty in behalf of the nation) or prophetic (one who speaks to the nation on the behalf of the Almighty) functions.<sup>36</sup>

Many scholars of religion and public affairs have largely accepted either Bellah's notion of civil religion or its modified premises constructed by Coleman and Gehrig and have designed studies attempting to detect the presence and functions of civil religion in various contexts including: American history,<sup>37</sup> the American populist movement,<sup>38</sup> newspaper editorial pages during a July 4<sup>th</sup>, "honor America" weekend in 1970,<sup>39</sup> Richard Nixon's 1972 presidential campaign,<sup>40</sup> and within the general population.<sup>41</sup> While most of these studies found the presence of civil religion, the findings of Thomas and Flippen who analyzed the content of one hundred randomly-selected newspaper editorials on or about July 4, 1970 indicate little evidence for the existence of the construct. Accordingly, they theorize that perhaps the construct is "more the creation (and fantasy) of the liberal political intellectual elite than active faith among the masses."<sup>42</sup>

Thomas and Flippen are not the only critics of Bellah's civil religion construct. The perspectives of sociologist Richard K. Fenn, historian John F. Wilson, and Roderick P. Hart are representative of the critiques of the civil religion construct. Fenn's critique is by far the most acerbic. He argues that American society has become so diversified that religion—of any type including civil religion—cannot constitute a sustainable basis for social cohesion.<sup>43</sup> The point is expressed by his assertion that "religious values seem to have little demonstrable relationship to what people actually do in work and politics."<sup>44</sup> Fenn's reluctance to accept civil religion is clearly grounded in a distrust of the rhetorical and sociological effects of religion. Indeed, he dismissively relegates religious expression to the realm of "nonrational aspects of individual behavior [such] as play, or the exploration of human relationships, or activities intended to relieve boredom. . ."<sup>45</sup> Fenn's criticism may have been more salient when he first wrote these words in 1972 prior to the



rise of the Religious Right as a potent force in American politics, the overt religiosity of the Carter presidency, and the nearly ubiquitous use of religious form and imagery by the occupants of the White House since that time.

In contrast, historian John F. Wilson believes that religion has been and remains an important force in American history. Wilson argues that religion (among other functions) establishes a storehouse of “religio-mythic materials” which do much to shape the collective beliefs of the national community.<sup>46</sup> In this sense, Wilson agrees with Bellah’s notion that religious elements retain powerful symbolic (rhetorical) influence in American culture. For this reason, Wilson claims that—of all the various conceptualizations of civil religion—Bellah’s is the most fruitful.<sup>47</sup> However, he finds that Bellah’s evidence “is inadequate to sustain the hypothesis” of a well-institutionalized and differentiated American civil religion.<sup>48</sup> Essentially Wilson grants Bellah’s contention that Biblical rhetorical archetypes are an important feature of American political discourse, yet they simply do not rise to the level of a differentiated religion. Wilson also expresses his uneasiness with the potential for “highly nationalistic” features to arise from a civil religion construct.<sup>49</sup>

One of the first communication scholars to engage the concept of civil religion was Roderick P. Hart. In his 1977 book *The Political Pulpit*, Hart challenges Bellah’s notion of civil religion claiming that it is a “hypostatization” of what are actually the rhetorical elements of religious discourse.<sup>50</sup> Hart does not deny that American political culture has a religious element, but (much like Wilson) argues that Bellah “overreacted to the discourse he inspected” by assuming that the presence of religious discourse in

political rhetoric was evidence of a civil religion.<sup>51</sup> Hart summarizes his critique of the civil religion construct in this way:

If the American civil religion is a religion (and, as we have seen, there is little reason to suspect that it is), it is a largely symbolic religion. As a ‘religion,’ it does not take verifiable action. It does not give alms to the poor. It does not even hold bingo games. Rather, it is a religion which exists within and because of discourse. Since it does nothing it is doomed to tag-along status existentially.<sup>52</sup>

Despite civil religion’s chilly reception from Professor Hart, the concept has become a viable theoretical explanation of religio-political rhetoric—particularly in studies of the presidency.

James David Fairbanks considers civil religion to be one of the defining characteristics of contemporary presidential rhetoric. However, Fairbanks does not subscribe to Bellah’s notion of a transcendent faith. Rather, he recognizes that the religious rhetoric so often a part of presidential addresses provides a vocabulary of “basic symbols of transcendence” which are used as rhetorical resources in a variety of situations.<sup>53</sup> The rhetorical employment of such symbols of transcendence is something quite apart from inferring a transcendent national covenant based upon the existence of such symbols. While Fairbanks and others<sup>54</sup> continue to label all instances of religious symbol using as civil religion, I will soon highlight the differences between the two and argue that such a conflation—while tempting at times—is problematic theoretically and methodologically.

Richard Pierard and Robert Linder have compiled perhaps the most wide-ranging study of civil religion and the presidency in their 1988 book *Civil Religion & the Presidency*. In contrast to Fairbanks, Pierard and Linder argue that American civil religion “represents an alliance between politics and religion at the national level, resting

on a politicized ideological base.”<sup>55</sup> The ideological base to which they refer appears as an amalgam of Bellah’s transcendent universal religion of the nation and the religious nationalism varieties of civil religion. Four premises inform their analysis: “(1) there is a God; (2) his will can be known and fulfilled through democratic procedures; (3) American has been God’s primary agent in modern history; and (4) the nation is the chief source of identity for Americans in both a political and religious sense.”<sup>56</sup> This they posit is the civil religion of the nation. Not surprisingly, they identify the president as the “‘pontifex maximus’ of American civil religion—principal prophet, high priest, first preacher, and chief pastor of the American nation.”<sup>57</sup> Pierard and Linder argue that many American presidents have fulfilled the role of chief priest by employing civil religion in their discourse. However, Pierard and Linder’s research is limited by the same problem as other explorations—many of the instances of religious rhetoric they call references to civil religion may be interpreted as instances of religious rhetorical form.

Although more sophisticated in her analysis, one finds a largely similar use of civil religion in Vanessa Beasley’s *You, the People*. Beasley is less concerned than Pierard and Linder with noting the existence of civil religion in a wide range of presidencies. Her concern is primarily with the function of civil religion—which she argues is to “associate American national identity not just with a certain set of shared beliefs but also with a particular type of shared feelings.”<sup>58</sup> While her shared belief hypothesis is both significant and compellingly argued, the use of civil religion retains its conceptual fuzziness. For instance, Beasley notes that the use of the “chosen people” motif by American presidents is a civil religious theme. If this is the case, from what branch(es) of civil religion theory do these themes emerge? What are the specific rites

and rituals of this faith? Could the use of the “chosen people” motif not be more easily explained as an instance of rhetorical form stemming from the deliverance form as discussed in chapter VI of this dissertation? In short, we must consider that not all instances of religious political rhetoric are civil religious in nature.<sup>59</sup>

### **The Contract of Civic Piety**

Although it lacks the long intellectual pedigree and wide transdisciplinary attention of Robert Bellah’s formulation of civil religion, Professor Roderick Hart’s idea that religious discourse in the American political realm is best explained as a secret contract between the government and organized religion has also influenced the scholarly conversation on the subject. Hart’s contract metaphor is as controversial as it is intriguing. Referring to the U.S. government as the first party and organized religion as the second party, Hart produces a fairly elaborate document that would make any attorney proud but puzzles some scholars due to its defining metaphor. The essential stipulations of Hart’s contract are as follows:

1. The guise of complete separation between the first party and the second party will be maintained by both parties.
2. The guise of existential equality between the first party and the second party will be maintained by both parties, but the second party’s realms shall be solely that of the rhetorical.
3. First party rhetoric will refrain from being overly religious and second party rhetoric will refrain from being overly political.
4. Neither of the aforementioned parties shall, in any fashion whatsoever, make known to the general populace the exact terms of the contract contained herein.<sup>60</sup>

Like any contract, this one appears to be a binding and inflexible agreement between two parties. Therein lays much of the problem. Conceiving of the relationship between two “parties” as dynamic as organized religion and the American government as an unchanging, mutually-binding agreement seems to fly in the face of the fact that both are in a constant state of flux. Not only does the composition of America’s religious

populace change over time, but so does the composition of the American government with every single election. Since the people who make up each of these parties change quite frequently, how can we be sure that the new members and leaders of organized religion will continue to agree to the terms their predecessors allegedly agreed to with the leadership of the U.S. government and vice versa?

Perhaps even more troubling are the problems with the individual stipulations Hart constructs. The increasing prominence of religious discourse on the campaign trail and the frequency with which religious leaders invite candidates to address their congregations hardly makes it look as though either party is interested in even the guise of complete separation. The administration of George W. Bush wherein religious organizations have received funding to be used to dispense various social services hardly looks like a “second party” that abides by its agreement that its realm is “solely that of the rhetorical.” The third stipulation is problematic for its vagueness. What does it mean that religion will not be “overly” political or that politics will not be “overly” religious? Finally, the notion that these stipulations exist as part of a secret bargain between religion and politics seems not only ill-founded but hyperbolic on its face.

The contract of civic piety has produced a wide variety of opinions about its veracity and the implications it holds for discourse in the American public sphere. Ronald Lee chides Hart for looking to religious rhetoric as a pragmatic discursive tool only. He claims that religion remains an important moral force because the “ideological narratives” of American politics “are frequently structured by religion.”<sup>61</sup> Carolyn Marvin agrees with Hart that religion can perform certain pragmatic functions, but argues that American nationalism which she believes to be grounded in “the rich rhetoric of

patriotism” which ultimately endows the government with the power to demand the bodily sacrifices of its citizens “is far more central” than any sort of rhetorical power religious rhetoric alone can manifest.<sup>62</sup> Robert V. Friedenberg agrees with Hart’s notion of a contract between organized religion and the government and heartily insists that “religious rhetoric in this nation is not overtly political.”<sup>63</sup> Nneka Ifeoma Ofulue would likely differ with Friedenberg’s assertion. Indeed, Ofulue’s analysis of President Bill Clinton’s apologetic appeal to the biblical persona of King David reveals just how useful religious narratives can be in accomplishing political purposes.<sup>64</sup> Michael E. Eidenmuller’s analysis of the rhetoric of the conservative evangelical Promise Keepers organization challenges Hart’s findings by suggesting that it is quite difficult for mainstream religion to maintain the kind of nonsectarian character necessary to be understood as instances of civic piety or civil religion.<sup>65</sup> Martin J. Medhurst finds the contract of civic piety to be useful descriptor of the interaction of religion and politics prior to the late 1970s (ironically just as *The Political Pulpit* was being published), but argues that the prominence of abortion as a political issue and the rise of the Religious Right (among other factors) have caused the contract to become outdated such that a new theoretical construct is now necessary to help clarify the relationship.<sup>66</sup>

Are there problems with civic piety as Hart conceptualizes it? Certainly. Is the construct without scholarly merit? Certainly not. Although it is vague, Hart’s idea that politicians must avoid the appearance of being overly religious helps explain the fact that American presidents make substantial, carefully calculated rhetorical efforts, to avoid the appearance of being too religious in order to enhance their appeal to the mass electorate.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, I contend that a new construct—religious rhetorical form—is

valuable and needed because it helps to explain in more detail the discursive relationship between politics and faith in America.

### **The Religious Rhetorical Form Construct**

In the previous chapter I posited that contemporary American presidents utilize religious rhetorical forms—distinctive yet commonly recognizable patterns of argument drawn from the religio-mythical reservoir of Christianity and Judaism—in order to accomplish various rhetorical and political objectives. These patterns possess an intellectual and cultural history which enables them to speak to the mythical needs of a diverse American audience. Although this is a new construct, its basic elements already exist in well-established form in the literature of public mythology and the rhetorical analysis of political rhetoric.

When speaking of public mythology it is important to realize that one is not speaking of a fictitious fairy tale, but rather the collective set of commonly-held beliefs which shape much of the substance of a given culture. Cultural historian Richard Slotkin explains that: “A mythology is a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors.”<sup>68</sup> Similarly, Joseph Campbell defines myth as a set of “clues to the spiritual potentialities of the human life” having much to do with “the experience of meaning.”<sup>69</sup> For Slotkin and Campbell, myths are far more than obscure features of literary or cultural history—they are crucial components of a culture’s daily lived experience in the world. They provided a culturally-based treasure trove of what Richard L. Greene calls “traditional metaphor addressed to ultimate questions.”<sup>70</sup> In

America, our cultural mythology often takes on a distinctively religious form and substance. As religious historian Sydney E. Ahlstrom explains:

Christianity here wears a garment of American weaving and American adornment. The religious history of the country is quite as striking as its political; it has had as many and as marked epochs; the influences which have shaped it have to be sought for in more numerous and more diverse sources; and those influences are more actively at work now than are those which produce political changes.<sup>71</sup>

In his own eloquent way, Ahlstrom recognizes the degree to which Americans as a people have incorporated religion into their socio-political discourse. Consider the following two examples. American history records all too painfully how Americans had, for several centuries, few qualms about systematically destroying the Native American tribes in part because of their rhetorical mythology which allowed them to view themselves as a “New Israel” or “chosen people” conquering and subduing the Promised Land. In 1898 Senate candidate Albert J. Beveridge famously expanded such ideas—this time with a distinctively missionary frame—by claiming that the same Providential power which had led Americans to tame the frontier was leading them now to “unfurl[ed] our banner” and Christianize the rest of the globe in the name of “liberty and civilization.”<sup>72</sup> Ernest Lee Tuveson and John B. Judis have correctly recognized that Beveridge’s argument has become part of a coherent millennial vision which has been used to justify everything from Theodore Roosevelt’s “big stick” diplomacy of the early twentieth century to America’s invasion of Iraq in 2003.<sup>73</sup>

Two important observations about such rhetoric must be made. First, both of the notions of millennial mission and subjugation of the Promised Land are inherently religious in substance. The observation that both of these religious motifs enjoy a prominent place in American political culture is neither unique nor surprising. However,



what is much less well understood is that each of these themes has become a consistent and distinctive pattern of argument in American political discourse. In the Promised Land form we find (1) a covenant people (2) chosen to possess a special land as a part of their divine inheritance and (3) an admonition to go forth and conquer the land in the name of the Almighty. In the case of the millennial missionary form we find: (1) an evil world (2) a just covenant people possessed of (3) a divine mission to redeem the world. Secondly, it must be noted that the basic premises of these patterns are so common in American cultural history that many Americans past and present quickly accept their political validity without question. Aiding the acceptance of these patterns is the fact that they are mythically satisfying to an American audience—that is to say that they confirm long-standing presuppositions about the exceptionalism of America. In the case of these two forms the exceptionalism is realized via the accomplishment of a divine mission or by leading the world to the accomplishment of a just cause. American presidents and politicians who use one or more of these patterns of religious argument may be interpreted as saying shibboleth—adopting and adapting a religious pattern of argument which identifies with and is complimentary to certain religio-mythic elements of the American public.

For instance, George W. Bush just days after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 proclaimed that in the challenge to defeat terrorism that nation had found “our mission and our moment.”<sup>74</sup> While additional exposition of his meaning was unnecessary, Bush gave it proclaiming that: “The advance of human freedom—the great achievement of our time . . . now depends on us. . . . We will rally the world to this cause by our efforts, by our courage.”<sup>75</sup> Throughout this address one sees the footprints of the

missionary rhetorical form—an evil world which a covenant people is destined to redeem by its actions. Bush’s rhetoric would have sounded strange indeed if not for the fact that the missionary form has been part of the American cultural consciousness since Puritan times.<sup>76</sup>

The approach I outline here is not entirely new. Pattern-based approaches to the study of political discourse have a long history in the communication discipline where many scholars have devoted considerable attention to the study of rhetorical genres.<sup>77</sup> Fewer studies have focused upon exploration of the religious argument patterns which occur in political discourse.<sup>78</sup> The rhetorical form construct differs from genre studies in that most genre studies are situationally-grounded (e.g. inaugurals, state of the union addresses, etc.), whereas the patterns explored in the rhetorical form construct tend to cut across various genres and are used in response to a wide array of rhetorical exigencies. The rhetorical form construct is also distinct from explorations of religious argument patterns because it acknowledges that such patterns emanate not just from one particular denomination or religious tradition, but from the religio-mythical reservoir of America’s religious culture.<sup>79</sup>

While the present study centers on religious rhetorical form in the contemporary presidency, it is important to clarify that the rhetorical form construct is not limited to either religion or the presidency. At its core, the rhetorical form construct is an approach which seeks to identify the discursive patterns which emerge in political rhetoric and then use the components, intellectual history, and mythical appeal of these patterns to aid in conducting rhetorical analyses of political rhetoric. As a theoretical construct and methodology it is based upon three principles. First, the religious rhetoric of

contemporary American presidents often appears in the form of distinctive, yet commonly-recognizable, and recurrent patterns of discourse. Second, that these patterns emerge from a rich religio-mythical reservoir of a variety of religious traditions. And third, that the premises and conclusions inherent within these patterns often aid presidents in achieving rhetorical and political objectives because they appeal to basic mythical needs within the public consciousness.

While an approach such as the one I have outlined will not solve all of the problems inherent to this dynamic area of study, I propose the inclusion of the religious rhetorical form construct as a compliment to the civil religion and civic piety constructs and as an aid in the rhetorical analysis of religious political rhetoric. I conclude this chapter by noting three benefits this approach affords coupled with brief illustrative examples.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Benefits of Religious Rhetorical Form**

First, the religious rhetorical form construct allows scholars to avoid the unwarranted assumptions of the civil religion and civic piety constructs. Civil religion assumes the existence of a transcendent universal reality wherein God looks upon America with particular favor and requires special service. As Wilson and Hart have both noted, we must look upon the claims of a transcendent universal religion of the nation with a healthy degree of skepticism. Such assumptions are problematic not for their veracity or lack thereof, but because such assumptions are untestable and thus beyond the scope of reliable academic inquiry. Religious rhetoric typically frames events and defines people in transcendent terms to be sure; nevertheless, we simply assume too much if we

believe that America enjoys a privileged covenantal relationship with God simply because such an assertion is found throughout American rhetorical discourse.

Such a relationship certainly exists by the rhetorical enactment of classic texts like Lincoln's Second Inaugural; but Bellah assumes too much when he suggests that the Almighty views America in the same way American political rhetors say he does. As Lincoln himself admitted: "Both read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other."<sup>80</sup> Certainly we cannot assume that Lincoln's use of religion in this eloquent speech reflected the full unadulterated truth of how God saw the American nation. We can (and must) assume however that rhetors North and South used the religious materials they had within their stock of cultural memory and religious tradition to explain the war and its causes according to their perspectives. This observation does not deny the tremendous potential rhetorical power of religious discourse. Quite the contrary since political discourse is, in John F. Wilson's words "shot through"<sup>81</sup> with religious meaning. However, we must accept the most parsimonious explanation—that the religious features of such texts are intended to convey meanings based upon the interpretations of the rhetors, not the Almighty.

The religious rhetorical form construct also enables us to avoid the unwarranted assumption of a secret alliance between organized religion and the government found in Hart's contract metaphor. This assumption is problematic because, as illustrated by the increasing prominence of religio-political rhetoric since Hart first articulated the contract, the terms of said agreement can be no more binding or permanent than the ever-changing people and ideas which comprise the two "parties." Both government and organized

religion have changed too much in the intervening years to define the relationship between them in such an unchanging—contractual—manner.

Second, the religious rhetorical form construct allows for a more nuanced identification of the religious elements of presidential rhetoric than does the civil religion construct. One major problem of much of the scholarship reviewed here is that it considers any religious reference, regardless of its function or apparent rhetorical features, to be civil religious discourse. I do not claim that none of the instances of presidential rhetoric noted by Bellah or others are civil religious, but it is certainly overreaching to claim that every instance of religion in a presidential address is civil religion.

We should consider the rhetorical presidency of Jimmy Carter as a helpful point of contrast between civil religion and religious rhetorical form. While some claim that Carter's rhetoric was civil religious, it contained a number of major violations of American civil religion. Michael James Adee identifies nominal, doctrinal, and structural violations of civil religion in Carter's rhetoric. For this analysis, the nominal and structural violations are most important for our purposes. Much of Carter's rhetoric fails to fit within the civil religion paradigm, Adee argues, because he explicitly identified his God and his religious tradition as distinctly Christian. In his candidacy announcement on December 12, 1974 Carter identified himself as "a farmer, an engineer, a businessman, a planner, a scientist, a governor, and a Christian."<sup>82</sup> Carter's penchant for proclaiming himself a "born again Christian" is also quite distinct from a nonsectarian tradition of civil religion. Carter's God was not some transcendent other but one with whom he enjoyed a personal relationship. Additionally, as Adee observes, Carter's religious

rhetoric fails to be civil religious on a structural level. His use of the jeremiad as the dominant rhetorical form in his speeches about the energy crisis is perhaps the clearest evidence of his employment of form rather than civil religion. Carter's jeremiad featured the well-established promise, declension, and prophecy format of the form,<sup>83</sup> allows us to see that he was using a religious rhetorical form rather than, as Adey calls it, a "patently generic" form of civil religion.<sup>84</sup> While it is certainly possible that Carter may have used the jeremiad form in a civil religious way, it would be poor analysis to hastily call his language civil religion given that it conforms so clearly to the stylistic features of the jeremiad. Thus, an analysis using the rhetorical form construct would help avoid such mislabeling and will allow the analyst to determine the degree to which civil religion and rhetorical forms may work together in a given discourse.

Third, the rhetorical form construct is more advantageous than either the civil religion or civic piety constructs when it comes to doing rhetorical analysis. Rhetorical form affords rhetorical analysts a veritable treasure trove of tools to consider the creation and functions of political discourse. The forms identified throughout this dissertation—the jeremiad, the atonement form, the deliverance form, the Pauline conversion narrative—enable us not just to observe that a particular text uses religious language, but to analyze such texts to discover rhetorical details about their creation, how they interact with and spring from the religio-mythic materials of American culture, and why such texts may be persuasive. Careful examination of the forms which under gird political discourses can shed light upon (although certainly not fully explain) why the public accepts certain messages while rejecting others. One problematic feature of both the civil

religion and civic piety constructs is a paucity of analytical tools compared to those provided by exploring the rhetorical form of a discourse.

Despite the conceptual and methodological problems with the civil religion and civic piety constructs which I have outlined here, I do not argue that either should be abandoned as theoretical concepts. Rather, each should be either reconceptualized or used in tandem with rhetorical form. Since ancient times civil religion has had to do with the veneration and propagation of the ideals of the state. Indeed, from Plato, to Rousseau, to Robert Bellah, this appears to be the primary function of civil religion—to promote the extant political arrangement and assure loyalty and citizenship among the society by promoting the civic values (and discouraging the civic vices) of that society. As Bellah would likely agree, American presidents and other political rhetors certainly do this. On January 20, 2005 George W. Bush delivered his Second Inaugural Address. While his inaugural was the primary exigency for the address, freedom was its central subject. While Bush used the rhetorical form of millennial mission to appeal to the national consciousness on this occasion, he spoke of freedom in what can only be described as civil religious terms:

There is only one force of history that can break the reign of hatred and resentment and expose the pretensions of tyrants and reward the hopes of the decent and tolerant, and that is the force of human freedom. . . . The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world. America's vital interests and deepest beliefs are now one. From the day of our founding, we have proclaimed that every man and woman on this earth has rights and dignity and matchless value, because they bear the image of the maker of heaven and earth. . . . Fancying these ideals is the mission that created our nation. It is the honorable achievement of our fathers. Now it is the urgent requirement of our nation's security and the calling of our time.<sup>85</sup>

Bush spoke of freedom as the central principle of the nation—one which also holds the key to the nation's future as much as it is a hallmark of its past.

Although their motives were certainly less partisan and militaristic than Bush's, one finds similar marriages between religious language and national ideals in classic American texts such as Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" and Lincoln's Second Inaugural. For King, the marriage was between a jeremiad critiquing of the nation for failing to live up to the principles of justice, inclusion, and equality as found in the Declaration of Independence. Lincoln too combined the jeremiad form with values such as justice and reconciliation. Thus, civil religion and religious rhetorical form can (and do) stand together in instances where the rhetor clearly identifies and venerates a national principle.

Likewise, the theoretical and methodological utility of the contract of civic piety can be enhanced by using it alongside rhetorical form. On several occasions President Bill Clinton used religious rhetorical form while paying homage to some stipulations of the contract of civic piety. As detailed in chapter VI, Clinton employed the deliverance form throughout the 1992 campaign using the new covenant as its defining metaphor. Yet, Clinton never explicitly acknowledged the religious heritage of either the metaphor or the form. Additionally, he showed a high degree of democratic and rhetorical sensitivity (his critics would say cowardice) when, according to speechwriter Michael Waldman, Clinton expunged large portions of the new covenant metaphor from the early drafts of his First Inaugural Address—particularly those portions which referred to the responsibility of average citizens in helping to bring about the promised deliverance.<sup>86</sup> Thus, Clinton, who was quite adept at using the deliverance form, may have been eager to avoid the appearance of being too religious on the politically-hallowed occasion of his inaugural.



The nexus of religious and political rhetoric is a dynamic one featuring many sets of interpretive, theoretical, and methodological problems. The rhetorical form construct I propose will not solve all of these, but may provide a clearer theoretical picture and a more comprehensive set of methodological tools than currently exist for the analysis of contemporary presidential religious rhetoric. As such, it has the potential to provide new insights which will help guide future scholarship of such rhetoric. The following chapters will both continue to demonstrate the utility of this approach, and reveal the rhetorical complexity of presidential religious rhetoric.

### Notes

1. Jean Jacques Rousseau, "Of the Social Contract or Principles of Political Right," in *Rousseau: The Social Contract and Other Later Political Writings*, trans. Victor Gourevitch (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 146.
2. Rousseau, "The Social Contract," 146.
3. Rousseau, "The Social Contract," 150.
4. Tocqueville provides additional details regarding each of these instances. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Henry Reeve (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 2003), 275-279.
5. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 273.
6. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 279.
7. To read Hart's contract in its entirety see Roderick P. Hart and John L. Pauley II, *The Political Pulpit Revisited* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2005), 43-44.
8. This theme is further expounded in Book II of Plato's *Republic* and Book X of *Laws*. Plato explained the necessity for certain core theological beliefs: primacy of the soul over the body, belief in and proper veneration of the gods, and belief in their justice and general benevolence (at least toward Athenian Greeks). Such articles of faith were not only beneficial, but vital to both the state and the individual. So pressing was the state's interest in religion, that he suggested those convicted of impiety be imprisoned for five years upon the first offense, and put to death upon the second. See Alan Bloom, *The Republic of Plato* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 35-61. See also Thomas L. Pangle, *The Laws of Plato* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 280-311.
9. When the Roman legions conquered new territories they brought their state religion, but often permitted the locals to continue worshipping their deities so long as they were worshipped in addition to the Roman pantheon. See Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* ed. David Womersley (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), pp. 230-275.
10. Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1988) 37.

11. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 2.
12. Bellah's original essay has been reprinted in several volumes. Robert N. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," in *Religion in America* ed. William G. McLoughlin and Robert N. Bellah (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1968), 20.
13. Robert N. Bellah, "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic," in *Varieties of Civil Religion* ed. Robert N. Bellah and Phillip E. Hammond (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 11.
14. For more detail regarding theory-building during this era see Gail Gehrig, *American Civil Religion: An Assessment* (Storrs: Society for the Scientific Study of Religion Monograph Series Number 3, 1979). See also Gail Gehrig, "The American Civil Religion Debate: A Source for Theory Construction," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20 (1981): 51-63.
15. This five-part taxonomy was conceived by Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones and has become quite well-accepted as the definitive explanation of the various conceptualizations of civil religion theory. Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, *American Civil Religion* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1990), 14-18.
16. Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 135.
17. Mead, *Lively Experiment*, 135.
18. Martin E. Marty, *A Nation of Behavers* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 180.
19. Sidney E. Mead, *The Nation with the Soul of a Church*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 69.
20. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 10.
21. Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 3.
22. Bellah, "Religion and the Legitimation of the American Republic," 13.
23. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, 152-163.
24. Quoted in Phillip E. Hammond, "Epilogue: The Civil Religion Proposal," in *Varieties of Civil Religion*, 205.
25. Bellah sees such themes in the rhetoric of presidents Lincoln, Kennedy, Johnson, Eisenhower, and Nixon. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," pp. 3-23.; Bellah, "American Civil Religion in the 1970s," in *American Civil Religion*, pp. 255-272. See also Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 11-64.
26. Mead sees evidence of James Madison's use of the concept in *Memorial and Remonstrance on the Rights of Man* (1784) where he famously wrote: "Before any man can be considered a member of civil society, he must be considered as a subject of the governor of the universe . . ." Mead, *Nation with the Soul of a Church*, 67-68.
27. Although they do not entirely concur with Bellah's argument that civil religion is a transcendent universal reality, scholars such as Martin Marty and Will Herberg have noted the distinctively patriotic flavor of some religious service in all the major religious traditions. See Martin E. Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic*, (New York: Crossroad, 1981). See also Will Herberg, *Protestant-*

*Catholic-Jew: An essay in American Religious Sociology*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983). For a critical perspective on such practices see William Inboden, "'One Cheer' for Civil Religion?" *Modern Reformation Magazine* 13.5 (2004): 1-6.

28. Conrad Cherry, "Two American Sacred Ceremonies: Their Implications for the Study of Religion in America," *American Quarterly* 21 (1969), 754.

29. Bellah, "Civil Religion in America," 20.

30. For an enlightening discussion of civil religion's capacity to legitimize extant governments see Ronald Beiner, "Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau on Civil Religion," *The Review of Politics* 55 (1993): 617-638.

31. Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 252.

32. Robert E. Stauffer, "Bellah's Civil Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 14 (1975): 390; N.J. Demerath III and Rhys H. Williams, "Civil Religion in an Uncivil Society," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 480 (1985), 154; Beiner, "Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau on Civil Religion," 623.

33. John A. Coleman, "Civil Religion," *Sociological Analysis* 31 (1970): 67-77; See also Gehrig, "American Civil Religion: An Assessment," 3; Gehrig, "The American Civil Religion Debate: A Source for Theory Construction," 51.

34. Coleman, "Civil Religion," 70.

35. Gehrig, "The American Civil Religion Debate," 56.

36. Rhys H. Williams and Susan M. Alexander, "Religious Rhetoric in American Populism: Civil Religion as Movement Ideology," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (1994) 1-15.

37. Conrad Cherry, *God's New Israel: Interpretations of American Destiny* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998).

38. Williams and Alexander, "Religious Rhetoric in American Populism," 1.

39. Michael C. Thomas and Charles C. Flippen, "American Civil Religion: An Empirical Study," *Social Forces* 51 (1972): 218-225.

40. Ronald C. Wimberley, "Civil Religion and the Choice for President: Nixon in '72," *Social Forces* 59 (1980): 44-61.

41. Ronald C. Wimberley, et al., "The Civil Religious Dimension: Is it There?," *Social Forces* 54 (1976): 890-900.

42. Thomas and Flippen, "American Civil Religion," 224.

43. Richard K. Fenn, "Bellah and the New Orthodoxy," *Sociological Analysis* 37 (1976): 160-166. Thomas Luckman makes a similar, but much less acerbic claim. See Thomas Luckman, *The Invisible Religion: The Transformation of Symbols in Industrial Society*, (New York: MacMillan, 1967).

44. Richard K. Fenn, "Toward a New Sociology of Religion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 11 (1972): 16.

45. Fenn, "Toward a New Sociology of Religion," 17.

46. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture*, 43.
47. John F. Wilson, "A Historian's Approach to Civil Religion," in *American Civil Religion*, 127.
48. Wilson, "A Historian's Approach to Civil Religion," 133.
49. Wilson, "A Historian's Approach to Civil Religion," 136.
50. Hart and Pauley, *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 39.
51. Hart and Pauley, *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 39.
52. Hart and Pauley, *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 70.
53. James David Fairbanks, "The Priestly Functions of the Presidency: A Discussion of the Literature on Civil Religion and its Implications for the Study of Presidential Leadership," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 11 (1981): 215.
54. The term civil religion seems to be applied to any instance of political rhetoric employing religious symbology. As noted later in the analysis, this conflation is not always misplaced, such as when the religious language is intended to define national principles and values. Nevertheless, religious themes are not necessarily civil religious themes despite this assertion in the current literature. See Vanessa B. Beasley, *You, the People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric*, (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004); Nneka Ifeoma Ofulue, "President Clinton and the White House Prayer Breakfast," in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 128; Daniel C. Hallin and Todd Gitlin, "Agon and Ritual: The Gulf War as Popular Culture and as Television Drama," *Political Communication* 10 (1993), 411; Alan D. DeSantis, "An Amostic Prophecy: Fredrick Douglass' 'The Meaning of July Fourth for the Negro,'" *Journal of Communication and Religion* 22 (1999): 65-92.
55. Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 25.
56. Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 25.
57. Pierard and Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*, 25.
58. Beasley, *You, the People*, 50.
59. A very similar point is raised by Steve Goldzwig who discovered a rhetoric of public theology used by religious figures who spoke in favor of political causes which was quite distinct from civil religion. He argues that this public theology exhibits characteristics of "expedient simplicity, existential content, and action ritual." While I do not propose that civil religion be redefined as public theology, Goldzwig's point that other explanations of religious rhetoric aside from civil religion is worthy of further exploration. Steve Goldzwig, "A Rhetoric of Public Theology: The Religious Rhetor and Public Policy," *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 52 (1987), 128.
60. Hart and Pauley, *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 43-44.
61. Ronald Lee, "The Force of Religion in the Public Sphere," in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 107.
62. Carolyn Marvin, "A New Scholarly Dispensation of Civil Religion," in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 116.
63. Robert V. Friedenberg, "Rhetoric, Religion and Government at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century," in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 122.

64. Nneka Ifeoma Ofulue, "President Clinton and the White House Prayer Breakfast," in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 127-136.
65. Michael E. Eidenmuller, "American Evangelicalism, Democracy, and Civic Piety: A Computer-Based Analysis of Promise Keepers' Discourse," in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 137-149.
66. Martin J. Medhurst, "Forging a Civil-Religious Construct for the Twenty-first Century: Should Hart's 'Contract' be Renewed?," in *The Political Pulpit Revisited*, 151-160.
67. Although he was perfectly willing to have religious conservatives believe he was one of their own, Ronald Reagan had to take certain rhetorical steps in order to avoid the public stigma that came with his premillennial theological views that the apocalypse could occur soon. When questioned about these beliefs in a 1984 debate with Democratic presidential candidate Walter Mondale, Reagan skillfully pulled back acknowledging that some theologians held the belief that Armageddon was coming soon: "But no one knows whether Armageddon . . . is a thousand years away or day after tomorrow. So, I have never seriously warned and said we must plan according to Armageddon." See Stephen D. O'Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 183. Likewise, George W. Bush, while more than happy to be identified as an evangelical Christian, has been unwilling to use the phrase "born again" to identify himself due to the negative public stigma attached to the term. See Carin Robinson and Clyde Wilcox, "The Faith of George W. Bush: The Personal, Practical and Political," in *Religion and the American Presidency* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 117-118.
68. Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 6.
69. Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1988), 5.
70. Quoted in Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence*, 14.
71. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 5.
72. Albert Beveridge, "American Empire: The March of the Flag," in *American Rhetorical Discourse* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., ed. Ronald F. Reid and James F. Klumpp (Long Grove IL: Waveland Press, 2005), 678.
73. See Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), vii. See also John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson*, (New York: Lisa Drew Books, 2004), 18-27.
74. George W. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the United States Response to the Terrorist Attacks of September 11, September 20, 2001." *Public Papers of the Presidents: George W. Bush—2001 vol. II*. (U.S. Government Printing Office: 2001), 1144.
75. Bush, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress," 1144.
76. For an extensive discussion of the Puritan missionary impulse see Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 8-30.
77. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); William L. Benoit, Joseph R. Blaney, and P. M. Pier, "Acclaiming, Attacking, and Defending: A Functional Analysis of Nominating Convention Keynote Speeches, 1960-1996," *Political Communication* 17 (2000): 61-84.; Celest M. Condit, "The Function of Epideictic: The Boston Massacre Orations as Exemplar," *Communication Quarterly* 33 (1985): 298-310.; B.L. Ware and Wil A. Linkugel, "The Spoke in Defense of Themselves: On the Generic Criticism of Apologia," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 59 (1973): 273-283.

78. Ernest G. Bormann, "Fetching Good out of Evil," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63 (1977): 130.; Denise M. Bostdorff, "George W. Bush's Post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 293., John M. Murphy, "'Our Mission and Our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11<sup>th</sup>," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 611. For more on the use of religious rhetoric in recent political campaigns see Martin J. Medhurst, "Religious Rhetoric and the Ethos of Democracy: A Case Study of the 2000 Presidential Campaign," In Michael J. Hyde (Ed.) *The Ethos of Rhetoric*, (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), pp. 114-135.; Kurt W. Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition: Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses 1960-1976," *Central States Speech Journal* 31 (1980): 159.
79. See John F. Wilson's description of the "religio-mythic materials" of American culture. John F. Wilson, *Public Religion in American Culture*, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1979), 43.
80. Quoted in Joseph R. Fornieri, *The Language of Liberty: The Political Speeches and Writings of Abraham Lincoln* (Washington: Regency Publishing, 2003), 698.
81. Wilson, "A Historian's Approach to Civil Religion," 125.
82. Quoted in Michael James Adee, *American Civil Religion and the Presidential Rhetoric of Jimmy Carter* (Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services 1993), 77.
83. David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America*. (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), 8.
84. Adee, *American Civil Religion and the Presidential Rhetoric of Jimmy Carter*, 123.
85. George W. Bush, "Second Inaugural Address, January 20, 2005," <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/01.20.05.html> (accessed January 31, 2005).
86. Michael Waldman, *POTUS Speaks: Finding the Words that Defined the Clinton Presidency* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 36-37.

### CHAPTER III

#### DEFINED BY DECLENSION: THE MORALISTIC RHETORICAL

#### TRAJECTORY OF JIMMY CARTER'S ENERGY JEREMIAD

In a nation that was proud of hard work, strong families, close-knit communities, and our faith in God, too many of us now tend to worship self-indulgence and consumption. Human identity is no longer defined by what one does, but by what one owns. But we've discovered that owning things and consuming things does not satisfy our longing for meaning. We've learned that piling up material goods cannot fill the emptiness of lives which have no confidence or purpose.

Jimmy Carter<sup>1</sup>

The days and weeks following any presidential campaign mark, for the victors, a turn from the elation and ecstasy of electoral victory to the frantic preparation inherent to the assumption of the presidential office. This was certainly the case when former Governor of Georgia James Earl Carter defeated President Gerald R. Ford in the 1976 presidential campaign. The election night celebrations had barely ended before the president-elect and his staff were barraged by an array of decisions ranging from cabinet appointments, to the future of the ongoing Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), to logistical and symbolic considerations about whether to walk or ride in the motorcade up to the Capitol for the inaugural ceremony.

In the midst of the typical tumult of a presidential transition, Carter's thoughts continually returned to the forthcoming rhetorical act wherein he would not only be "invested with the office of the presidency"<sup>2</sup> but would present his vision of America—his inaugural address. Carter wanted to use the auspicious occasion to challenge the nation to return to its "first principles."<sup>3</sup> For Carter, this return to first principles had to

include an appropriate response to the nation's growing energy crisis—a problem which would bedevil him throughout his entire presidency. In his presidential memoir, Carter recalled that although there was little mention of it in his speech, the problem of energy and the need he perceived for the entire American populace to conserve energy and “stop looking to the federal government as a bottomless cornucopia”<sup>4</sup> was foremost in his mind on the day of his inauguration.

Such desires to return America to first principles were hardly new in the annals of inaugural discourse. Indeed, Woodrow Wilson's first inaugural (which Carter claimed as his favorite) contained numerous warnings of “inexcusable waste” of natural resources along with exhortations of those who would use the government for “private and selfish purposes”<sup>5</sup> rather than the common public good. In this spirit, the original draft of Carter's inaugural prominently featured the conditional promise of II Chronicles 7:14 in the exordium: “If my people who are called by my name, shall humble themselves and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land.”<sup>6</sup> The stark language elicited calls for greater rhetorical caution from several Carter aides. Chief pollster Patrick Caddell, for one, argued in a memorandum to the president-elect that such a quotation “could be interpreted as your suggesting that the *American people* humble *themselves* and turn from *their* wicked ways and *their* sins, but you've been arguing all along [in the campaign] that the *government was bad* but the *people were good*.”[italics added]<sup>7</sup> Caddell's prescient warning and a frank conversation with his wife Rosalynn prompted Carter to reluctantly abandon the potentially-inflammatory verse in favor of the far-more-benign Micah 6:8.<sup>8</sup> While Carter wisely avoided denouncing the American people as sinners in his inaugural,



he would later prove unable (and unwilling) to countenance the nation's energy sins and break free of the rhetorical constraints imposed upon him by the moralistic elements of an ancient religious rhetorical form so prominent in American discourse that historian Sacvan Bercovitch calls it "a national ritual."<sup>9</sup>

Carter's reluctance to don the prophetic mantle in his inaugural certainly did not prevent him from doing so in his rhetorical campaign to address the energy crisis. Although noteworthy studies have been devoted to the failure of Carter's energy crisis rhetoric, particularly his infamous "malaise" speech of July 15, 1979,<sup>10</sup> that scholarship fails to provide a convincing explanation as to why his many rhetorical efforts to address the crisis failed. Carter ascended to the White House after capturing a majority of the popular vote, and defeating an incumbent president. He enjoyed relatively high public popularity until the summer of 1977 when his approval rating began a slow but steady decline toward its nadir of sixteen percent in August of 1978.<sup>11</sup> While some have suggested a relationship between Carter's energy rhetoric and his faltering public opinion after the July 15, 1979 speech, it seems advisable to analyze the totality of Carter's energy campaign (from February 2, 1977 to July 15, 1979) and the religious rhetorical form in which it was cast before positing a potential relationship between Carter's rhetorical failure and declining popularity. Additionally, while the general scholarly consensus remains that Carter's energy campaign was a failure, the previous scholarship provides an array of incomplete explanations for that failure ranging from bad management skills and infighting among his presidential advisors,<sup>12</sup> to his criticism of the public as "profligate,"<sup>13</sup> to his use (or misuse) of the jeremiad form.<sup>14</sup> While each of these

findings certainly help explain Carter's rhetorical failure, I posit that the moralistic rhetorical trajectory of Carter's energy jeremiad resulted in a failed shibboleth.

This chapter offers a fresh reading of Carter's energy campaign through an analysis of the religious rhetorical form Carter employed—the American jeremiad. While a number of important studies have recognized the presence of this rhetorical form in the rhetorical presidencies of both Jimmy Carter and his successor Ronald Reagan,<sup>15</sup> they do not consistently recognize the important differences in their respective performances of the jeremiad. Chapters III and IV of this dissertation offer a parallel examination of how the jeremiad was used by each president, noting the disparate rhetorical trajectories of their jeremiads. These chapters provide instructive case studies of the varied uses of the jeremiad form itself and raise important questions about its conceptualization in contemporary scholarship on religious political rhetoric. The current chapter will begin this larger examination of the use of religious rhetorical forms in the contemporary presidency by exploring how Jimmy Carter adopted a jeremiad with a decidedly moralistic trajectory which was progressively condemnatory, featured a progressively expansive declension, and apocalyptic expressions of imminent doom.

This chapter will commence by reviewing the history and extensive literature on the jeremiad while acknowledging the unanswered questions raised by contemporary scholarship, analyzing the manifestations and features of the jeremiad in Carter's ill-fated rhetorical campaign for a national energy policy, and finally discussing the rhetorical and political implications inherent to Carter's unsuccessful shibboleth.

### **The American Jeremiad**

Of all the religious rhetorical forms discussed throughout this dissertation, no other has achieved either the astounding intellectual status or as broad a use throughout the history of American political rhetoric as the American jeremiad. It has been called “America’s oldest rhetorical form”<sup>16</sup> and has been identified by countless authors as a corrective rhetorical form offering “a rhetoric of indignation, expressing deep dissatisfaction” all in the name of “challenging the nation to reform.”<sup>17</sup> More recently, several studies have noted that while the jeremiad maintains a corrective tone, its primary telos may be conservative in instances where the rhetor intends to protect the extant political order, call attention to the nation’s idyllic vision of itself, or even unify the nation in response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.<sup>18</sup> Since it is employed by rhetors in pursuit of both socio-political change and conservation of the status quo, it is often referred to as a secular rhetorical form—or perhaps more accurately—a secularization of a religious rhetorical form.

Of course, the historical foundations of the secular American jeremiad are neither secular nor American. As implied by its namesake, the basic elements of the form emerged from the religious beliefs and practices of the ancient Hebrews as set forth in the sacred texts of Judaism. The *Pentateuch* describes the religious experience of the Israelites as being uniquely covenantal in form and practice. The nation of Israel was covenantally bound to the Almighty.<sup>19</sup> Indeed the ancient Hebrew word for covenant means “bond” or “fetter.”<sup>20</sup> Historically, the covenant was both communal, since the entire nation of Israel was bound to it, and conditional since the nation could (through its sin) destroy the covenantal relationship along with the protections and blessings it

provided. As biblical scholar Bernhard W. Anderson explains, the Mosaic covenant featured “a strong conditional note, for its endurance depends on the people’s obedience to the covenant commandments.”<sup>21</sup> The *Book of Jeremiah* predicts the fall of Jerusalem to the Babylonians because of its dalliances with the pagan polytheism of its Canaanite neighbors—a particularly serious offense in light of Israel’s religious status as God’s chosen people. In the opening chapters of the book, God appoints Jeremiah to “utter my judgments against them, for all their wickedness in forsaking me; they have burned incense to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands.”<sup>22</sup>

Jeremiadic rhetoric has been an important feature of American rhetorical history since the colonial era.<sup>23</sup> While the Puritans of New England were hardly the only practitioners of religious rhetoric to immigrate to the American shores, the fact that they most assiduously practiced the jeremiad form in their political sermons combined with the abundance of surviving sermon texts from the New England colonies provides the clearest view of the development of the jeremiad form in America.<sup>24</sup> Governor John Winthrop’s 1630 lay sermon, *A Model of Christian Charity*, is usually cited as the classic statement of the Puritan’s jeremiadic rhetorical vision. Winthrop’s sermon from the deck of the *Arbella* described the colonial endeavor in distinctively covenantal terms by equating the civic and religious challenges of the new Massachusetts Bay settlement:

For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world: we shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the way of God and all professors for God’s sake; we shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us, till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.<sup>25</sup>

As Winthrop's famous words acknowledged, these religious separatists were imbued with the powerful notion that their excursion into the New World was far more than a simple geographic migration—it was in the later words of Samuel Danforth, a divine “errand into the wilderness.”<sup>26</sup> The Reverend John Cotton initially anointed the errand with a jeremiadic sermon he preached to the Winthrop party prior to their departure. Cotton's sermon *God's Promise to His Plantations* identified the party as a new Israel—a covenant people chosen by God for a special purpose.<sup>27</sup>

To the Puritans, the divine errand included both a sense of redemptive mission and a notion of their own exceptionalism. The Puritan colonists sought to make New England a bastion of pure religion against what they perceived to be the spiritual and ecclesiastical bankruptcy propagated by Catholicism's dominance throughout most of Europe which, they believed, had also infected the Anglican Church.<sup>28</sup> Many Puritans earnestly longed for the day when their descendants would return to England and redeem it once and for all by spiritual and physical force from the corrupt practices of the Catholic Church. When this vision failed to materialize, they began to look inward in an effort to establish a utopian theocracy—a Zion wherein God's millennial kingdom could begin to take shape on the Earth.

Grandiose utopian and redemptive visions aside, the Puritan society was, as many Puritan ministers were quick to point out, much like biblical Israel in that it perceived itself to be covenantally bound to God. Eminent literary and cultural historian Perry Miller, whose thorough account of the religious, social, and political elements of life in colonial-era New England remains one of the finest and most detailed explorations, explains that:

in the migration to Massachusetts all entered into a covenant, among themselves and with the Lord. In the one compact the people were dedicated both to theological and to social duties. So John Cotton, preaching the farewell sermon to the departing fleet in 1630, Thomas Hooker, delivering an address before his flight from England in 1633, and John Winthrop, expounding the purpose of the migration aboard the *Arbella* in 1630, replying to Antinomians in 1637, or at last in 1645 describing the character of covenant liberty to the General Court—these leaders were fully equipped from the beginning with a consistent doctrine, sustained by logic and studded with Biblical proofs, which reached from the throne of God to the deliberations of the General Court of Massachusetts Bay, which conceived of their society as in covenant with God like Israel of old, which supplied meanings and directions not alone for theological speculation but for the civil polity as well.<sup>29</sup>

Miller's description of the jeremiad's covenantal background accurately represents one of the reasons for the popularity of the form. The jeremiad was uniquely suited to the Puritan cosmology which found a religious meaning behind any event good or bad. "There is" Miller writes with regard to the daily events of life in New England an "implicit recognition of a causal sequence: the sin exists, the disease breaks out; the sins are reformed, the disease is cured."<sup>30</sup>

Ministers and civic leaders (often one in the same) continually warned, and in some cases utterly excoriated, their audiences for offenses ranging from sleeping during religious services, to the excessive materialism which developed as the colonies became more prosperous, to the ever-present problems of drunkenness and sexual promiscuity.<sup>31</sup> The purpose of these warnings was ultimately to preserve God's covenant with New England by rectifying the offending behavior. If any particular sin was allowed to remain it would spread like a plague throughout the region and threaten the very survival of God's "New Jerusalem." In Puritan theology sin led to more than questionable morality, it placed the very survival of the covenant and covenant people in jeopardy.

This aspect of the covenantal framework from which the jeremiad derives its rhetorical power is best understood by noting the rhetorical structure of the jeremiad. David Howard-Pitney provides the clearest and most historically accurate description of the American jeremiad's basic elements, arguing that the form unfolds in a promise—declension—prophecy pattern.<sup>32</sup> In the “promise” phase, the audience is reminded of God's covenant with them. As Winthrop said of what was about to become the Massachusetts Bay colony: “the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as His own people. . . .”<sup>33</sup>

Yet, the goal of such sermons was to continually bring the community back into proper confines of the civic and religious covenant. As such, a “declension” was necessary to enumerate the ways in which the covenant community was failing to meet the demands of the covenant. A minister could choose to focus on one or two of the community's most dangerous transgressions or list a host of sins being committed by the community. The authors of the *Result*—a report presented by the Massachusetts Synod in 1679 which sought to outline the causes for New England's perceived spiritual backsliding—had elected the latter and went to great pains to list the communal transgressions of the entire Massachusetts colony.<sup>34</sup> As Miller notes, the declension was the defining feature of colonial-era jeremiads—so much so that a minister's homiletical reputation would rise or fall depending upon how vividly he could portray the community's failures and the potential consequences thereof.<sup>35</sup>

The rhetorical form culminated with both a prediction and a choice. The “prophecy” phase, like its rhetorical counterpart in the rhetorical style of the *Book of Jeremiah*, provides the hope of restoration. The hope is of course conditional, predicated

upon the response of the audience. As Winthrop put it, later generations would either look back to them and say “Lord make it like that of New England” or, if they failed to reform, Winthrop and his band would “shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants and cause their prayers to be turned into curses . . . .”<sup>36</sup>

Reflecting one of the unresolved questions about the telos of the American jeremiad, Sacvan Bercovitch claims that jeremiads such as Winthrop’s, though they appeared as foreboding as any from the *Book of Jeremiah*, were less warnings of doom and more a message of hope and “unshakable optimism.”<sup>37</sup> After all, the Puritans reasoned, God would not bother to discipline his chosen people if they had not been destined to find their way out of declension and once again return to God’s favor.<sup>38</sup> While these tensions will be dealt with more comprehensively later, Bercovitch’s trenchant observations about the effects of such jeremiads are worth noting. “The passengers,” Bercovitch observes of those aboard the *Arbella*, “were entering into [a] covenant with God, as into a marriage bond . . . .”<sup>39</sup> Thus the jeremiad, largely as used by the Puritans, became perhaps the dominant feature in the rhetorical landscape of American history. As many authors have noted, the form has been employed by numerous rhetors throughout colonial history, the American Revolutionary era, the abolitionist movement, the civil rights movement, and on various occasions in contemporary political rhetoric.<sup>40</sup>

Since its identification by Perry Miller, scholars across the humanities disciplines have recognized its historical and contemporary prominence and methodological utility. Some authors likely overstate the jeremiad’s importance by finding it everywhere a socio-political rhetor simply criticizes his or her opponents or speaks against some shortcoming of American society.<sup>41</sup> Yet, there can be no doubt that—as evinced by the



voluminous literature on socio-political jeremiads—it is an important concept in the study of religious political rhetoric. More than a decade after Miller introduced the concept to the academic community, historian Sacvan Bercovitch reinterpreted the jeremiad form by emphasizing the interplay between its corrective function and (in his view) optimistic orientation. Bercovitch argues that the jeremiad form supported the Puritans' utopian cosmological vision to “give the kingdom of God a local habitation and a home” thanks to the implicit message that those rebuked by God had also been chosen for a special destiny.<sup>42</sup> Emphasis upon this positive side of the sometimes foreboding prophetic warnings was used “in part by the American Puritans as a vehicle of social control” and “as a crucial justification of their New England Way.”<sup>43</sup> Miller's death in 1963 precluded any sort of formal debate between them; yet their differing interpretations of the jeremiad have elicited a lively debate in the scholarly literature.<sup>44</sup>

Following Bercovitch's interpretation, David Howard-Pitney focuses upon the form's corrective potential and the optimistic outlook of the jeremiad as used by African-American rhetors from Frederick Douglass to Martin Luther King and beyond. Howard-Pitney's thorough analysis reveals a good deal about the rhetorical malleability of the form—a feature that the communication literature has been slower to recognize and which has not yet been meaningfully or consistently applied to presidential rhetoric. For instance, Howard-Pitney observes that the form exhibits an “ebb and flow of optimism about American promise and progress” and that notable African-American rhetors such as Douglass, W. E. B. DuBois, and King “vacillated with regard to America's perfectibility.”<sup>45</sup> Howard-Pitney's work presents the jeremiad as a highly-adaptable, dynamic rhetorical form which can either preserve the status quo (e.g. Booker T.

Washington) or serve as a harsh rebuke against a profligate nation for having forgotten the meaning of its mission (e.g. Douglass, DuBois, King). While Howard-Pitney suggests that the rhetorical trajectories of these jeremiads were defined by the “ebb and flow of optimism about American promise,” this interpretation overlooks one of Perry Miller’s previously-noted observations that Puritan-era jeremiads were evaluated by their declensions. As I will demonstrate, Miller’s original idea about defining a jeremiad according to its declension offers a meaningful way in which to address the unresolved issue of whether to interpret jeremiads as primarily corrective, conservative or both. This approach raises the possibility of viewing the jeremiad as a variable rhetorical form adaptable to either purpose based upon who gets blamed for the community’s trespasses.

Starting with the publication of several highly-influential essays by Ernest Bormann and Kurt Ritter in the 1970s and 1980s,<sup>46</sup> public address scholars began seriously investigating the jeremiad form in the sermons of the American colonial era,<sup>47</sup> as a shaper of national identity and public memory in contemporary American film,<sup>48</sup> as socio-cultural critique by intellectuals and social movement leaders,<sup>49</sup> and as a prominent feature of presidential campaigns.<sup>50</sup> This extensive body of scholarship tells us that the American jeremiad is a common feature of socio-political rhetoric with the apparent potential to promote socio-political change by presenting itself as a provocative gadfly swarming in the face of a nation or group that is portrayed as failing to live up to its own principles.

As noted previously, several more recent studies have begun to explore the corrective/conservative dichotomy of the jeremiad in more detail. In his analysis of Robert F. Kennedy’s rhetorical response to the death of Martin Luther King, John M.

Murphy finds that the jeremiad as employed by Kennedy actually reinforced the status quo because of the way Kennedy used it to recall America's enduring values and idyllic past. According to Murphy, Kennedy's rhetoric found little wrong with America's basic socio-political structure. It was only the violation of American ideals that led to violations of an American covenant such as racial injustice and the assassinations of King and other Civil Rights leaders. As Murphy notes, this particular manifestation of the jeremiad "clearly limits the range of political choices that are available even as it creates social cohesion."<sup>51</sup>

### **Rhetorical Trajectories**

Dionisopoulos and colleagues provide a thoughtful method of addressing the interpretive problems of the corrective/conservative dichotomy in socio-political jeremiads by introducing the notion of "rhetorical trajectories."<sup>52</sup> Borrowing the term from a 1984 article in the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* by Leland M. Griffin,<sup>53</sup> they posit that over time political rhetors develop ways of talking about the issues which most concern them and develop rhetorical tropes and strategies which will "ensure emphasis of certain ideas and visions rather than others."<sup>54</sup> In King's jeremiadic rhetoric for instance, these authors detect both moral and pragmatic trajectories. Their findings are worth quoting at some length:

King established a rhetorical progression marked by dual trajectories. The first was a moral trajectory marked by oppositional god and devil terms such as justice and injustice, freedom and oppression, and morality and immorality. The second was a pragmatic trajectory marked, ironically, by the term "dream," and developed as a vision that would be achieved by pragmatic acts leading to inclusion in the benefits of a good society for those who had been left out. During the 1950s and the early 1960s, these trajectories were convergent since King offered jeremiads that located the enemy of the civil rights movement in unfulfilled fundamental values, not in individuals and certainly not in the American political system.<sup>55</sup>

As these authors note, King's dual trajectories collided later in his career when his jeremiads followed the moralistic rhetorical path at the expense of the pragmatic trajectory.

Dionisopoulos and colleagues' description of rhetorical trajectories—the overall orientation of a set of discourses as described above—is useful in understanding how Carter and Reagan used their respective jeremiads because this methodological perspective can enable us to determine qualitative differences between their two calls for national repentance. However, Murphy and Dionisopoulos and colleagues do little to explain how the rhetorical trajectories of jeremiads are defined. While it is undoubtedly helpful to look to the god and devil terms as Dionisopoulos and his colleagues do, the picture is incomplete. Mark Stoda and George Dionisopoulos endeavor to bring clarity to this determination of rhetorical trajectory in a more recent study of Alexander Solzhenitsyn's scathing critique of America at a 1978 Harvard University commencement address. They find that Solzhenitsyn's critique angered the American audience largely because it “was unprepared to accept this message from this messenger.”<sup>56</sup> However, because Solzhenitsyn's message was a broad scathing critique of Western (particularly American) society for a lack of courage in confronting the threats of communism and for the West's excessive materialism, a more parsimonious explanation may be offered. Solzhenitsyn's jeremiad featured a declension that was simply too broad, too all-encompassing, and too strong for his American audience to stomach.

The extensive investigations of the jeremiad raise two important issues which will be addressed by the remainder of this chapter. First, How can we distinguish between

corrective and conservative jeremiads when both texts use a similar form? Put another way: What makes one jeremiad “conservative” in the way Murphy uses the term, while another discourse using the same form can be said to use the jeremiad to accomplish a radical reform agenda as described by Howard-Pitney? Second, How can we account for the apparent success of some jeremiadic discourses while others fail? In other words: Why does the public appear to heed the warnings of some such as Reagan who speak in this prophetic form while largely ignoring the prophetic warnings of others such as Carter and Solzhenitsyn?

### **Jimmy Carter’s Energy Jeremiad**

Just one week after his inaugural address, Jimmy Carter met with many of the nation’s religious leaders at the first annual national prayer breakfast of his administration. He told them the behind-the-scenes story about choosing Micah 6:8 over II Chronicles 7:14 for inclusion in his inaugural address. Like the one-time Sunday school teacher he was,<sup>57</sup> he could not let the story pass without highlighting a religious application. The story—particularly the objections of those on his staff who claimed the people would not understand the original verse—was “illustrative of the problem that we face.” “Sometimes” he said, “we take for granted that an acknowledgment of sin, an acknowledgment of the need for humility permeates the consciousness of our people. But it doesn’t.”<sup>58</sup> Referencing theologian Paul Tillich’s famous dictum that true religion involves continual soul-searching and reflection, he concluded that “Sometimes it’s easier for us to be humble as individuals than it is for us to admit that our Nation makes mistakes.”<sup>59</sup> Carter went on to opine that average American citizens, religious leaders, and politicians including himself were often guilty of what he called the “worship [of]

our Nation.”<sup>60</sup> For Carter, it would simply not do to speak about America in platitudes. Real patriotism—like real religion in Carter’s mind—involved perpetual evaluation, reflection, and, when necessary, rebuke. As religious biographer Wesley Pippert noted of Carter: “His central theme is that persons, and nations, are fallible and sinful and require forgiveness; that persons, and nations—perhaps especially the United States—are ‘afflicted,’ . . . and need to learn humility. . . .”<sup>61</sup>

This observation about Carter’s manifestly religious outlook and its effect upon his approach to presidential leadership is not surprising for those acquainted with his rhetorical presidency and the religious rhetoric he employed as president and in his quest for the office.<sup>62</sup> However, it is noteworthy that he, like the biblical Jeremiah and the colonial-era Puritan ministers who developed the jeremiad form on this continent, showed an early willingness to cast prophetic blame. One detects this most clearly in the 1977 prayer breakfast speech wherein Carter revealed his willingness to call the nation to account for what he perceived to be its cultural and political sins. For Carter, presidential leadership also had to be spiritual and moral leadership, thus a corrective chastising message would be necessary at times. Even at this early stage in his presidency, however, the scope of Carter’s declension was actually far more expansive than those of either the prophet Jeremiah or the Puritan ministers. Not only did he cast judgment on the profligate masses, he cast it upon himself and others within his administration and the federal government. This feature of his jeremiad is most notable in his near embarrassment for having pulled his rhetorical punches in the inaugural address.

We politicians, we leaders, in that sometimes excessive degree of patriotism, equate love of others with love of ourselves. We tend to say that, because I am a Congressman, because I am a Governor, because I am a Senator, because I am a Cabinet member, because I am President of the people, and because I

love the people and because I represent them so well, then I can justify their love myself.<sup>63</sup>

It would have been unthinkable for Jeremiah or John Winthrop to have included themselves in the same category as their rhetorical audiences. Not only would such an inclusion have eroded their prophetic authority, it would have failed to fit the theological and cosmological underpinnings of the jeremiad form because it was the sinners who were endangering the community's very survival by placing the covenant at risk.

Carter's remarks to the 1977 national prayer breakfast clearly established two of the three the basic elements of his jeremiad's moralistic rhetorical trajectory. While his prophetic warning would become shriller as his administration progressed and the energy crisis deepened, this early speech demonstrated both his willingness to condemn the nation and the degree to which he was willing to blame the entire nation—including himself—for national sin. The trajectory of his jeremiad would also evolve to incorporate apocalyptic elements as he portrayed the energy crisis as an outgrowth of a lack of moral and spiritual strength in America, and asserted that the people would have to help solve the energy crisis yet at the same time harbored doubts about their ability to rise to the challenge.

One week after the prayer breakfast, Carter embarked upon what would become a long and ultimately ill-fated rhetorical campaign of seven major speeches featuring the energy crisis as either the primary focus of each address or an important element of other national problems. Carter's first televised national address on February 2, 1977 mentioned energy as only one of a number of important projects he hoped to address during his presidency. Yet Carter's decision to address the public sitting next to an open fire in the White House library while wearing a cardigan sweater on that winter night left

little doubt about the seriousness with which Carter viewed the energy crisis. In this first address of Carter's developing energy jeremiad he used "waste" as a ubiquitous devil term and identified it as the ultimate source of the projected energy shortfall. "The amount of energy being wasted" he said "which could be saved is greater than the total energy that we are importing from foreign countries."<sup>64</sup> While Carter did not reveal the exact methodology he or his staff used to arrive at this statistic, it conveyed a sense of a serious, yet avoidable national crisis. Neither the nation nor government was blameless for the crisis he observed, yet his message left the impression that he believed that the public's penchant for waste was the real source of the problem. Consequently, he indicated that the public would have to help bear much of the burden for solving the crisis:

All of us must learn to waste less energy. Simply by keeping our thermostats, for instance, at 65 degrees in the daytime and 55 degrees at night we could save half the current shortage of natural gas. There is no way that I, or anyone else in the Government, can solve our energy problems if you are not willing to help. I know that we can meet this challenge if the burden is borne fairly among all our people—and if we realize that in order to solve our energy problems we need not sacrifice the quality of our lives.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the confusion that ensued from Carter's seemingly contradictory assertions that sacrifice would be required (e.g. lowered thermostats in winter), but that the quality of life for Americans would remain intact,<sup>66</sup> Carter's assertion of public responsibility for the energy crisis was entirely consistent with his remarks at the 1977 prayer breakfast and with the basic message of declension inherent to the jeremiad form. Yet, this penchant for public blame would not only become a staple component of Carter's energy jeremiad, it would grow in his subsequent energy speeches to include far more than just the mass public and would become a moral, spiritual, and political challenge.



In April of 1977 Carter delivered two major addresses on energy. The first on April 18 was designed, as Carter later wrote in his presidential memoir, to provide members of Congress with “maximum encouragement from the folks back home” and “to arouse and sustain public interest in the energy issue.”<sup>67</sup> The opening lines of the speech promised “an unpleasant talk” regarding “a problem that is unprecedented in our history,” one which was in fact “the moral equivalent of war.”<sup>68</sup> Aside from Carter’s stated desire to arouse the public to lobby Congress for the legislation he was about to propose, the stark exordium reflected a renewed sense of urgency about the worsening crisis exacerbated by continued decreases in U.S. oil production and increasing demand. The bulk of the address consisted of ten principles which would guide the program Carter was about to send to Congress. The “cornerstone” of these principles was a reduction of national energy demand via conservation. Leading up to this principle Carter returned to his claim that the U.S. was “the most wasteful nation on Earth.”<sup>69</sup> The only way the crisis could possibly be resolved, he argued, was “if the Government takes responsibility for it [the energy plan] and if the people understand the seriousness of the challenge and are willing to make sacrifices.”<sup>70</sup> Such sacrifices “will be painful—but so is any meaningful sacrifice.”<sup>71</sup> Again, the not so subtle implication was that the sinful American public was to blame for the problem and would soon be forced to pay for it. More importantly, the moralistic trajectory of Carter’s jeremiad had begun to take an increasingly apocalyptic<sup>72</sup> turn. Failure to follow his proposed energy plan could very well lead to a “national catastrophe.”<sup>73</sup>

Two days later, Carter presented his plan to Congress covering much of the same ground. Interestingly, Carter appeared to pull back from the apocalyptic tone of the

previous message to the public. Although he began much as he had a few days before by explaining that he did not expect to receive much applause for his “sober and difficult presentation,”<sup>74</sup> he resisted defining the energy crisis as a moral or spiritual crisis, preferring instead to characterize it as a political problem with a series of policy-oriented solutions. Only once did he claim that failing to act on his recommendations would result in “impeding catastrophe” and only once did he use the previously ubiquitous devil term of “waste” when discussing the nation’s energy consumption.<sup>75</sup> In contrast to his previous energy speeches, the April 20<sup>th</sup> speech to Congress was a thorough and detailed presentation of his comprehensive energy plan aimed at conservation and increased domestic production of fossil fuels and alternative energy sources. Absent was any mention of the “sacrifices” required of the American people. Only once in this speech did Carter talk about the need for individual Americans to cut their use of gasoline, but even this was quickly followed up with his optimistic assessment that “I believe that the American people can meet this challenge.”<sup>76</sup> Carter’s jeremiad in the April 20<sup>th</sup> speech to Congress was still quite stark, yet his criticisms were more oblique and directed toward the oil and gas industries, automakers, and the various political interests who sought to maintain the status quo. Carter’s choice to use in this address a jeremiad possessed of a pragmatic, policy-oriented trajectory ultimately paid political dividends with the Congress in the form of its willingness to create a Department of Energy—a specific proposal within his congressional speech and one of Carter’s few legislative triumphs to emerge from the energy crisis.

These energy addresses reveal that Carter curiously chose to employ a jeremiad with a moralistic trajectory when speaking to the general public but largely abandoned

this approach before Congress in favor of a more focused and pragmatic declension wherein he chastised specific groups of sinners such as profiteering oil companies and automakers who made inefficient gas-guzzling automobiles. His pragmatic jeremiad not only pointed out their sins, but offered focused policy initiatives to regulate their corporate behavior. While Carter's efforts to regulate corporate energy wasters ultimately failed to gain congressional approval, he certainly enjoyed more success with his speech to Congress. Had Carter's remaining energy jeremiads maintained the trajectory he used on April 20, 1977 he may have avoided or at least minimized the cataclysmic rhetorical and political failures to come.

Carter presented his next major energy speech to Congress on November 8, 1977. This address began on a positive and pragmatic note. He thanked Congress for acting on his proposal to create the Department of Energy to oversee the energy crisis and help regulate prices and expressed thanks for approving his nomination of James Schlesinger to head the new Cabinet-level agency. Nevertheless, Carter was unable to restrain himself from defining the ongoing legislative efforts in the same all-or-nothing fashion as he had in his earlier addresses. The legislators working on the energy plan would, he argued, prove "the strength and courage of our political system."<sup>77</sup> As he had done in the address to the public in April of 1977, Carter established the struggle over energy policy as the defining challenge of his presidency and, even more significantly, as the defining challenge of the American political system. Of course the problem with such an approach is that if the challenge is not met with victorious results. Logical consistency would dictate that the public interpret failure to pass an energy bill as tantamount to a failure of

the American governmental structure and its leaders. To illustrate the seriousness of the crisis he reenacted a statement he had received from a concerned American:

A few weeks ago, in Detroit, an unemployed steelworker told me something that may reflect the feelings of many of you. 'Mr. President,' he said, 'I don't feel much like talking about energy and foreign policy. I'm concerned about how I'm going to live. . . . I can't be too concerned about other things when I have a 10-year-old daughter to raise and I don't have a job and I'm 56 years old.' Well, I understand how he felt, but I must tell you the truth. And the truth is that you cannot talk about economic problems now or in the future without talking about energy.<sup>78</sup>

While his intentions were undoubtedly honorable, Carter's decision to include this statement in the speech made him appear dismissive and aloof to the cares of this and other average American citizens. This rhetorical misstep served to reinforce the growing public perception in late 1977 and early 1978 that Carter's energy quest was a quixotic one pursued at the expense of other more pressing domestic concerns such as low wages, unemployment, and inflation.

Additionally, Carter's rhetorical rebuke of the unfortunate steelworker rang with the harshness of a prophetic censure delivered in the name of absolute truth. Although Carter, for the first time, used this major address to assign some of the responsibility for the energy crisis on the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), but with hardly a pause he argued that America was ultimately to blame for its own problems: "The world price is set by a foreign cartel—the governments of the so-called OPEC nations. . . . Our biggest problem, however, is that we simply use too much and waste too much energy."<sup>79</sup> Thus, even when presented with the opportunity to blame a powerful foreign organization for the crisis, Carter chose to chastise the nation for what he saw as its fundamental sin of wasteful over-consumption.

More than a year passed before Carter once again took up the energy battle in a major televised address. In the meantime, the fight continued on the rhetorical and legislative fronts through 1978 and into the spring of 1979 with Carter's comprehensive energy plan ultimately stalling in spite of his intensive lobbying efforts and public statements encouraging Congressional passage.<sup>80</sup> In the spring of 1979 political instability in Iran coupled with a series of OPEC-driven increases in the price of oil resulted in domestic price increases and decreased production by U.S. oil companies.<sup>81</sup> These factors led to long gas lines and further depressed the already sullen economic outlook of the public. Carter and his aides came to understand that bold presidential action was required to contain the crisis.

On April 5, 1979 Carter again took to the nation's living rooms to announce his plan to deal with the country's immediate energy problems. Ostensibly the address was designed to announce that Carter would use the provisions of the National Energy Act of 1978 to gradually introduce price decontrols into the U.S. oil market. The plan operated under the assumption that the previous policy of keeping the price of oil artificially low, while an attractive short-term option for consumers buying gasoline and heating oil, created a disincentive for domestic oil companies to produce more to meet the shortfall. The speech further proposed a "windfall profits" tax on oil companies to indirectly recoup consumer losses from the price increases which would inevitably follow in the wake of removing price controls.

Despite the address' explicitly pragmatic exigence, Carter used it as an opportunity to elaborate upon the energy jeremiad he began in 1977. While this energy speech was "briefer and tougher" than the 1977 speeches, Carter failed to heed the advice

of his Assistant to the President for Communications Gerald Rafshoon who counseled him to blame the crisis on Congress, the oil companies and the OPEC cartel.<sup>82</sup> He began by noting that the energy crisis was “very serious—and its getting worse.”<sup>83</sup> In what may be one of the longest lists of public expostulations by an American president (5 paragraphs containing 179 words), Carter enumerated the symptoms manifested by the nation’s energy disease. These admonishments included: too much use (and waste) of energy, too much dependence upon foreign oil, lack of sufficient domestic energy production, too much government “redtape” [sic] hindering development, inevitable rises in the prices of energy, too little use and development of alternative energy sources like solar energy, and problems with nuclear power as evidenced by the incident at Pennsylvania’s Three Mile Island.

After citing some of the nation’s many energy problems he passionately implored the audience to listen to his prophetic warning: “The energy crisis is real . . . I said so in 1977, and I say it again tonight, almost exactly 2 years later. Time is running short.”<sup>84</sup> In an attempt to communicate the urgency of the problem, Carter resurrected the recent specter of Three Mile Island, but only to suggest that the national shortage of fossil fuels was ultimately more dangerous than the infamous nuclear accident because America’s “national strength” was “dangerously dependent” upon it.<sup>85</sup> National extrication from the crisis, he explained, would be difficult and would require all Americans to use less oil but pay more for it. Carter proceeded to offer a clumsy explanation about how decontrol of oil prices would contribute to inflation in the short-term but would decrease it in the long run. Of course, decontrol of domestic oil prices was only part of his response plan. A “windfall profits tax” was also required, he argued, to keep oil companies from hoarding

“the profits which they have not earned.”<sup>86</sup> While this part of the message was certainly aimed at domestic oil producers, Carter curiously and confusingly made it sound as though this was just another sin of the American general populace—one which required atonement and corrective action. “Unless you speak out,” he warned “they [oil companies] will have more influence on Congress than you do. . . . Unless your voice is heard, once again the selfishness of a few will block action which is badly needed to help our entire Nation.”<sup>87</sup> Thus, Carter’s return to his energy campaign brought a return to the moralistic trajectory of his jeremiad. This renewed campaign was marked by threats of impending doom and condemnation of the general public. While each of Carter’s energy speeches featured dire warnings, expostulations, and the definition of the energy crisis as a serious political crisis, his infamous energy speech on July 15, 1979 would prove to be the pinnacle of his moralistic energy jeremiad.

As the energy crisis deepened and gas lines lengthened during the summer of 1979, the Carter administration (and Carter himself) seemed uncertain about how to handle the crisis. Scheduled to give another energy address to the nation on July 4<sup>th</sup>, Carter abruptly cancelled the speech and retreated to Camp David where he spent the next 11 days meeting with his advisors, officials from all levels of government, and social and religious leaders. While he received advice about everything from the oil crisis to his personal leadership style, Carter seemed most interested in an idea Patrick Caddell mentioned to him in a report entitled “Of Crisis and Opportunity” in April of that year.<sup>88</sup> Caddell’s thesis was that the crises and socio-political upheavals of the 1960s and 70s had done significant damage to America’s collective confidence and had resulted in a deep public pessimism. Carter’s meetings at Camp David seemed to confirm Caddell’s

findings and provided him with fresh examples of the deep spiritual crisis he already believed to have long beset America. When this advice is considered alongside his willingness to admonish the American public it is little wonder that Carter chose to confront the national malaise (a term Carter never used in the speech) with a major address.<sup>89</sup>

Carter's most accusatory and apocalyptic speech of the energy campaign began, somewhat oddly, with something approaching an admission of shared guilt for the national condition. Speaking as the head of the national government, he acknowledged that the scope of his rhetoric had "become increasingly narrow, focused more and more on what the isolated world of Washington thinks is important. . . . and less and less about our Nation's hopes, our dreams, and our vision of the future."<sup>90</sup> "Why" he wondered in a frustrated tone "have we not been able to get together as a nation to resolve our serious energy problem?"<sup>91</sup> The nation's problems, he argued, "are much deeper—deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession."<sup>92</sup> For evidence of the breadth and depth of the crisis, Carter turned to the words of many of the people with whom he had met during the Camp David retreat or who had written to him about the state of the nation during that time. Carter read nineteen quotations which spoke to the sullenness of the national mood or offered advice or criticisms of Carter or the government at large. Five of these quotations chastised Carter personally for a series of missteps including "managing the Government" rather than leading the nation, failing to make himself accessible to the public, and responding the energy crisis by "issu[ing] us BB guns."<sup>93</sup>



While his belief in the basic goodness of America and Americans had been confirmed during the retreat, it also reinforced “some of my longstanding concerns about our Nation’s underlying problems.”<sup>94</sup> The heretofore unnamed “underlying problems” were severe indeed—so much so that “all the legislation in the world can’t fix what’s wrong with America.”<sup>95</sup> The decidedly pessimistic assessment revealed the tragic trajectory of the rhetorical path Carter had crafted for this energy campaign. The nation’s energy problems were not simply matters of errant or myopic policy, but reflected an erosion of the nation’s once robust moral and spiritual core. America’s former greatness, Carter explained, was a product of its confident national spirit which he defined simply as “confidence in the future.”<sup>96</sup> Although the concept of the “American Dream” has always eluded specific definition, it has nonetheless endured as a central rhetorical motif in American discourse.<sup>97</sup> The idea of progressive upward mobility—that things will be better for the children’s generation than for their parents’—is perhaps the defining hallmark of the American Dream. It is the loss of faith in this particular idea that Carter initially defined as the heart of the crisis of confidence.

However, Carter’s declension went beyond even this indictment—not only were Americans losing faith in the American Dream, but in American democracy. Carter’s pointed and expansive declension is worth quoting at some length:

Our people are losing that faith, not only in government itself but in their ability as citizens to serve as the ultimate rulers and shapers of our democracy. As a people we know our past and we are proud of it. Our progress has been part of the living history of America, even the world. We always believed that we were part of a great movement of humanity itself called democracy, involved in the search for freedom, and that belief has always strengthened us in our purpose. But just as we are losing our confidence in the future, we are also beginning to close the door on our past.<sup>98</sup>

Like a Puritan minister, Carter's declension continued by cataloguing a list of political and spiritual offenses including: "worship of self-indulgence and consumption," a lack of optimism about the nation's future, low voter turnouts, decreasing productivity of American workers, failure to "save for the future," and "a growing disrespect for government and for churches and for schools, the news media, and other institutions."<sup>99</sup>

The prophetic rhetorical cadence of the declension was reinforced by the notion that the speech was "not a message of happiness or reassurance, but it is the truth and it is a warning."<sup>100</sup> Although the speech included some specific injunctions against the government and special interest groups for exacerbating the energy crisis, its prophetic message was aimed squarely at the whole of American society—a society Carter characterized as being in peril of forsaking the American dream, its democratic system, and its spiritual strength.

What was Carter's answer to the crisis of confidence about which he spoke? At the policy level, Carter proposed a halt on any future increases in oil imports and simultaneously hinted at huge increases in funds and resources devoted to the development of alternative energy sources. Additionally, he pledged that an energy security corporation would be created to coordinate these conservation and development efforts.

However, the most important steps had to be taken by the people. The "deeper problems" he spoke of could be addressed only by rebuilding national confidence. As a solution to this grave crisis Carter's proposed corrective was sorely lacking in specifics. He called upon Americans to "say something good about our country" when the chance arose, and to carpool and use public transportation in the name of patriotism.<sup>101</sup> What was

clear however, was the stark choice to be made and the dire consequences for failing to regain national confidence.

We are at a turning point in our history. There are two paths to choose. One is a path I've warned about tonight, the path that leads to fragmentation and self-interest. Down that road lies a mistaken idea of freedom, the right to grasp for ourselves some advantage over others. That path would be one of constant conflict between narrow interests ending in chaos and immobility. It is a certain route to failure.<sup>102</sup>

As had happened before his inaugural address two and a half years earlier, there were some within his administration who questioned Carter's decision to rebuke the public so harshly. Presidential advisor Stuart Eizenstat, Vice President Walter Mondale, and Energy Secretary James Schlesinger all believed the idea of a major energy speech about a lack of public confidence to be ill-conceived. On July 10<sup>th</sup>—five days before the speech—chief speechwriter Gerald Rafshoon sent a memorandum to Carter expressing grave doubts about employing such a strategy.

We must look carefully at each self-deprecating remark and each negative comment about America. We'd hear them thrown back ad nauseam during a campaign, even on the day after the speech. 'Jimmy Carter thinks America has lost its spirit. . . . After three years in office, Jimmy Carter says that he's failed to lead this country . . . and he's right.' People listen to Presidential speeches the way they listen to rock music. If they heard the same words a hundred times they still wouldn't know any of the words. But they 'receive' the tone, the beat, the rhythm.<sup>103</sup>

In spite of Rafshoon's well-founded fears, Carter's July 15<sup>th</sup> energy speech initially succeeded in enhancing Carter's public perception as indicated by an eleven percent bounce in his public approval rating.<sup>104</sup> One particularly enthusiastic gentleman from Everett, Massachusetts wrote to Carter to say he thought the speech was "terrific" and offered his assistance in "whipping the asses" of anyone opposed to his leadership.<sup>105</sup> However, the accepted resignations of three cabinet members days later on July 19<sup>th</sup>

combined with the depth and breadth of his declension again created the impression of an administration quick to blame the public, but lacking any substantial ideas or solutions to either the energy crisis or the national malaise.

Although there is a general scholarly consensus that Carter's malaise speech failed, there are a wide array of explanations as to why. Dan F. Hahn correctly notes that Carter called for a "societal rebirth" but fails to acknowledge his use of the jeremiad form.<sup>106</sup> Accordingly, Hahn makes it appear as though Carter was simply rhetorically brutalizing the public (hence Hahn's title "Flailing the Profligate") rather than employing the type of expansive declension derived from the jeremiad form. In a more sophisticated analysis of Carter's July 15<sup>th</sup> energy jeremiad, Craig Smith and Kathy Smith find that this speech was a fundamental "mishandling of the jeremiad form."<sup>107</sup> Strictly speaking, however, Carter did not mishandle the jeremiad in the exact way Smith and Smith propose. Carter's harsh rebuke commingled with exhortations to take corrective action—in this case by conservation and adoption of his policy recommendations—was entirely consistent with the jeremiads of the Old Testament and the Puritan era. However, as Smith and Smith also note, Carter did err in his use of the jeremiad by critiquing himself among the sinners. His creation of a declension so expansive as to include the prophet himself as a target of exhortation not only defied the conventions of the jeremiad form but caused Carter to out-Puritan the Puritans. In a presidency already plagued by the energy crisis and legion economic woes, Carter's moralistic jeremiad proved to be more than the public could take and consequently contributed substantially to the ultimate demise of his presidency.

The foregoing discussion indicates that Jimmy Carter's energy jeremiad was marked by a moralistic rhetorical trajectory which grew progressively more virulent and expansive with nearly every speech up until its culminating address on July 15, 1979. This analysis suggests that it was his use of a harsh, expansive declension which defined the rhetorical trajectory of Jimmy Carter's jeremiad. While this is a noteworthy finding in its own right, I will conclude by noting the political and rhetorical implications inherent to Carter's employment of such a moralistic jeremiad.

### **Carter's Jeremiad as a Failed Shibboleth**

Scholars and political observers alike have often been critical of the thirty-ninth president's rhetorical prowess. Eugene McCarthy reportedly called him an "oratorical mortician."<sup>108</sup> Although scholars of presidential rhetoric often attribute Carter's rhetorical shortcomings to his penchant for casting prophetic judgments upon the American public, these studies focus only upon the culmination of Carter's energy jeremiad on July 15, 1979.<sup>109</sup> I have attempted to demonstrate that the best way to understand Carter's condemnatory rhetoric is to document its progression from speech to speech throughout his energy campaign. More importantly, my analysis of Carter's energy campaign sheds light upon the question of distinguishing between conservative and corrective jeremiads. Carter's energy jeremiad became progressively more condemnatory, exhibited a broad declension which included everyone (including himself) and even suggested that the American public and its political institutions might lack the strength or will to solve the problems presented by the energy crisis. While the condemning tone and occasionally apocalyptic features of his rhetoric may not be especially surprising, the breadth of Carter's declension certainly is. Even when events such as OPEC price hikes and the

unwillingness of domestic oil companies to expand production provided Carter with someone else he could plausibly blame, he chose to blame the public and himself and (like a Puritan) to reason that the nation's problems must ultimately stem from a lack of spiritual acuity. Political jeremiads may fail because they are delivered by the wrong messenger,<sup>110</sup> but political jeremiads certainly will fail if the audience perceives that the rhetor blames them for the problems about which he or she is speaking. This sense of betrayal by audiences becomes even more palatable since as communication scholar Mary Stuckey notes we look to our presidents to be "the nation's chief storyteller . . . We take from him not only our policies but our national self-identity."<sup>111</sup>

Of course, careful students of rhetorical history must give Carter credit for one aspect of his energy rhetoric—his jeremiad was largely consistent with both the original prophetic model and the Puritan jeremiad. Except for his unfortunate tendency to include himself<sup>112</sup> and his administration in the list of sinners as perhaps a misguided attempt at identification, Carter's jeremiad was remarkably similar to the Puritan variety in particular; always finding fault with its own community while still believing that the same community was God's representative on Earth. In this way, Perry Miller's analysis of the jeremiad as a "confused" rhetorical form appears to be confirmed in Carter's case.<sup>113</sup> Even when spiritual or temporal victory was achieved, the Puritan jeremiahs would admonish their flocks to guard against the sin of pride whereby they could undo their newly-acquired victory. Even when Carter's April 1977 message to Congress produced favorable results, he still showed a willingness to chastise Americans who in November of that year failed to see the urgency of the energy crisis. While a lack of rhetorical prowess undoubtedly contributed to this and other rhetorical miscues, Carter's

rhetoric certainly matched its historical and religious American analog. However, as we will see in the following chapter, the jeremiad is an extremely malleable rhetorical form—so much so that Carter’s successor, Ronald Reagan, used the very same form but found radically different results thanks to his choice to emphasize the “promise” and “prophecy” elements rather than the declension.

Obviously, Carter’s energy jeremiad failed as a political shibboleth. The American public simply would not accept Carter’s blame. Interestingly, Carter’s policy ideas about decontrol of oil prices and the need for a Department of Energy have endured and remain as important aspects of America’s energy policy to this day. Thus, we are left with the conclusion that Carter’s failure was not entirely a matter of bad policies, but of the strict application of a rhetorical form ill-suited to provide the comfort and reassurance so desperately needed during the economic and social turbulence of the late 1970s. Carter had announced his presidential candidacy in December of 1974 by pledging to reunite the Watergate-weary nation with “a belief in the greatness of our country.”<sup>114</sup> Unfortunately, a sense of national greatness was absent from Carter’s energy rhetoric due to the moralistic trajectory of his jeremiad. This desire for national reassurance was perhaps best reflected by commentator Bill Bishop who years later opined that Carter’s rhetoric ultimately made possible the election of his successor: “The cock-sureness of Reagan stood in such high and enviable contrast to the brooding and searching Carter. We picked the happy ending of Hollywood over the heat and dust of Plains, Ga.”<sup>115</sup> As such, Carter’s energy jeremiad is a compelling example, although a negative one, of the rhetorical power of religious rhetorical forms in American political discourse.

## Notes

1. Jimmy Carter, "Energy and National Goals: Address to the Nation, July 15, 1979." *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter—1979 Book. II.* (United States Government Printing Office: 1980), 1237.
2. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 15.
3. Jimmy Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 19.
4. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 21.
5. Woodrow Wilson, "First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1913"  
<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25831> (accessed March 4, 2007).
6. Copies of this original draft may be found in the archives of the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, GA. See "Inaugural Speech: First Draft," Undated, copy in White House Staff Office Files, Office of Staff Secretary, Handwriting File, Box 2, Jimmy Carter Library.
7. Memo, Pat Caddell to Governor, Undated, copy in White House Staff Office Files, Office of Staff Secretary, Handwriting File, Box 2, Jimmy Carter Library.
8. As Carter claimed to have recognized in his presidential memoir, the words of Micah 6:8 are far less controversial than II Chronicles 7:14: "He hath showed thee, O man, what is good; and what doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God." See Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 20.
9. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 132.
10. See Dan F. Hahn, "Flailing the Profligate: Carter's Energy Sermon of 1979," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 10 (1980): 583-587; William J. Holland, "The Great Gamble: Jimmy Carter and the 1979 Energy Crisis" *Prologue* 22 (1990): 63-79; Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith, "Political Jeremiads from the Bully Pulpit," in *The White House Speaks: Presidential Leadership as Persuasion* (Westport: Praeger, 1994) pp. 133-164.
11. Jimmy Carter's public approval rating on the economy and foreign policy had eroded from a respectable 47% in May of 1977 to an undesirable 33% by November of 1977 to an abysmal 16% in June of 1978. See Gary King and Lyn Ragsdale, *The Elusive Executive: Discovering Statistical Patterns in the Presidency* (Washington: CQ Press, 1988), 356. Some journalists attributed this epic slide in Carter's popularity to a lack of "defining philosophy." See Sidney Lens, "Perspectives: On Carter's Slipping Popularity. . .," *The Progressive* June 1978, 9-10. Others attributed his decline in popularity to his lack of inspirational rhetoric. See James T. Wooten, "The President as Orator: His Deliberate Style Appears to Run Counter to the Inspiration He Seeks to Instill," *New York Times* January 26, 1978, A15.
12. Holland's analysis of archival materials suggests that bad management and infighting among his aides were to blame for the failures of Carter's energy rhetoric: "absence of political leadership, poor organization, and an inability to sustain a clear focus and vision for the nation." See Holland "The Great Gamble," 63.
13. See Hahn, "Flailing the Profligate," 583-587.
14. See Smith and Smith, "Political Jeremiads from the Bully Pulpit," 151-162.



15. A number of studies have acknowledged the jeremiadic rhetoric of the Carter and Reagan presidencies. See Richard L. Johannesen, "Ronald Reagan's Economic Jeremiad," *Central States Speech Journal* 37 (1986): 79-89.; Kurt W. Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition: Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses, 1960-1976," *Central States Speech Journal* 31 (1980): 153-171.; Kurt Ritter and David Henry, *Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992).
16. Kurt Ritter, "President Lyndon B. Johnson's Inaugural Address," in *The Inaugural Addresses of Twentieth-Century American Presidents* ed. Halford Ryan (Westport: Praeger, 1993), 196.
17. David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005), 6. James Darsey also discusses the corrective quality of jeremiads in the rhetoric of radical movements in America. See James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 6-7, 16-34, 35-42.
18. John M. Murphy, "'A Time of Shame and Sorrow': Robert F. Kennedy and the American Jeremiad," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990) 401-414; A. Susan Owen, "Memory, War and American Identity: Saving Private Ryan as Cinematic Jeremiad," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2002): 249-282; Daniel O. Buehler, "Permanence and Change in Theodore Roosevelt's Conservation Jeremiad," *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (1998): 439-458. The jeremiad form has also been useful to President George W. Bush in his response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. See Denise M. Bostdorff, "George W. Bush's Post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 293-319; John M. Murphy, "'Our Mission and Our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11<sup>th</sup>," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 607-632.
19. The notion of covenantal religion pervades the Jewish faith as related in the Old Testament. Indeed, biblical scholars have noted the Abrahamic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants. While each has its own unique features and emphases, all share the idea of conditionality—they can all be ultimately undone by the sinfulness of the people. For an extensive discussion of the covenantal elements peculiar to the Book of Jeremiah see Margaret D. Zulick, "The Agon of Jeremiah: On the Dialogic Invention of Prophetic Ethos," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 125-148.
20. Bernhard W. Anderson, "Covenant," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138.
21. Anderson, "Covenant," 139.
22. Jeremiah 1: 16, Revised Standard Version.
23. The existence of jeremiadic rhetoric in early America is well documented. See Emory Elliott, *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Donald Weber, *Rhetoric and History in Revolutionary New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).
24. Ellis Sandoz acknowledges the problems inherent in the fact that the majority of surviving sermon texts from colonial America originated in the New England colonies. Acknowledging this historical fact as a limitation of current literature he writes that "the publication of sermons in America in the eighteenth century was a specialty, if not a monopoly, of New Englanders." See Ellis Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805 vol I* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), xi.
25. Quoted in Perry Miller, *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 83.
26. Samuel Danforth, "A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness," in *American Rhetorical Discourse* ed. Ronald F. Reid and James F. Klumpp (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2005), 39.

27. Kurt W. Ritter and James R. Andrews, *The American Ideology: Reflections of the Revolution in American Rhetoric* (Annandale: Speech Communication Association, 1978), 17.
28. Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 8, 15. See also Bercovitch, 5.
29. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 415.
30. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 27.
31. In 1679 the Puritan congregations of Massachusetts Bay meet in Synod and generated a list of sins for which it blamed the colony's near defeat in King Philip's War. This document simply entitled "The Result" listed ten sins of the New England communities from materialism to drunkenness and debauchery. However the most serious of these charges was that subsequent generations of Puritans seemed to take less interest in matters of faith than did their predecessors—a development that would ultimately lead to the Half-Way covenant and a host of related theological crises. See Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 34-36.
32. Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad*, 7.
33. Quoted in Miller, *The American Puritans*, 83.
34. See Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 33-36.
35. See Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 29.
36. Miller, *The American Puritans*, 83.
37. Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 7.
38. See Stout, *The New England Soul*, 80.
39. Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 3.
40. See footnote eighteen.
41. It is a mistake to interpret every instance of political rhetoric wherein a political rhetor cautions the people about the future as an instance of jeremiadic rhetoric. I part ways, for instance, with those who interpret Bill Clinton's First Inaugural Address as a jeremiad. Craig A. Smith and David E. Procter and Kurt Ritter argue that Clinton's inaugural used covenantal language and must therefore be a jeremiad. As I will explain more fully in chapter VI, Clinton was calling for a new national compact—a "new covenant" with new blessings, obligations, and roles for both citizens and the government. By definition, a calling to a new covenant cannot be a jeremiad since jeremiads call the citizens to recall the obligations inherent to the old covenant. See Craig A. Smith, "The Jeremiadic Logic of Bill Clinton's Policy Speeches," in *Bill Clinton on the Stump, State, and Stage: The Rhetorical Road to the White House* ed. Stephen A. Smith (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 73; David E. Procter and Kurt Ritter, "Inaugurating the Clinton Presidency: Regenerative Rhetoric and the American Community," in *The Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues, and Communication Strategies* ed. Robert E. Denton, and Rachel L. Holloway (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 1-16.
42. Sacvan Bercovitch, "Horologicals to Chronometricals: The Rhetoric of the Jeremiad," in *Literary Monographs vol. 3* ed. Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 14.

43. Bercovitch, "Horologicals to Chronometricals," 22.

44. Some historians prefer Miller's approach in *The New England Mind* to Bercovitch's. See James Hoopes, "Art as History: Perry Miller's New England Mind," *American Quarterly* 34 (1982): 3-25; David Harlan, "A People Blinded from Birth: American History According to Sacvan Bercovitch," *The Journal of American History* 78 (1991): 949-971. Others prefer Bercovitch's emphasis upon Puritan rhetoric and its subsequent national influence. See Robert Middlekauff, *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals 1596-1728* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971).

45. Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad*, 15. Howard-Pitney makes a similar point in several of his more prominent essays. See David Howard-Pitney, "Wars, White America, and the Afro-American Jeremiad: Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King Jr.," *The Journal of Negro History* 71 (1986): 23-37; David Howard-Pitney, "The Enduring Black Jeremiad: The American Jeremiad and Black Protest Rhetoric, from Frederick Douglass to W. E. B. DuBois, 1841-1919," *American Quarterly* 38 (1986): 481-492.

46. Ernest G. Bormann, "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 396-407; Ernest G. Bormann, "Fetching Good Out of Evil: A Rhetorical Use of Calamity," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63 (1977): 130-139; Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition," 153-171.

47. Stephen H. Browne, "Samuel Danforth's Errand into the Wilderness and the Discourse of Arrival in Early American Culture," *Communication Quarterly* 40 (1992): 91-101; Charles J.G. Griffin, "Sins of the Fathers: The Jeremiad and the Franco-American Crisis in the Fast Day Sermons of 1798," *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 47 (1982): 389-401; Ritter and Andrews, *The American Ideology*, 15-17.

48. Owen, "Memory, War and American Identity," 249-282.

49. Sociologist Robert N. Bellah frames his arguments for American civil religion as a jeremiad toward American culture. Bellah's jeremiad differs from Alexander Solzhenitsyn's in that Bellah holds out more hope that the nation can change and regain its spiritual bearing. See Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 182-188; Mark Stoda and George N. Dionisopoulos, "Jeremiad at Harvard: Solzhenitsyn and 'The World Split Apart,'" *Western Journal of Communication* 64 (2000): 28-52.

50. Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition," 153-171; Murphy, "'A Time of Shame and Sorrow,'" 401-414.

51. Murphy, "'A Time of Shame and Sorrow,'" 412.

52. George N. Dionisopoulos et al. "Martin Luther King, The American Dream and Vietnam: A Collision of Rhetorical Trajectories," *Western Journal of Communication* 56 (1992): 91-107.

53. See Leland M. Griffin, "When Dreams Collide: Rhetorical Trajectories in the Assassination of President Kennedy," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 70 (1984): 111-131.

54. Dionisopoulos et al. "A Collision of Rhetorical Trajectories," 95.

55. Dionisopoulos et al. "A Collision of Rhetorical Trajectories," 96.

56. Stoda and Dionisopoulos, "Jeremiad at Harvard," 44.

57. Much has been written about Carter's personal religious faith and its impact upon his presidency. See Andrew R. Flint and Joy Porter, "Jimmy Carter: The Re-emergence of Faith-Based Politics and the Abortion Rights Issue," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35 (2005): 28-51; James T. Baker, *A Southern Baptist in the White House* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977); Wesley G. Pippert, *The Spiritual Journey of Jimmy Carter: In His Own Words* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1978).

58. Jimmy Carter, "National Prayer Breakfast, Remarks at the Annual Breakfast, January 27, 1977," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977 Book I*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 24.

59. Carter, "National Prayer Breakfast, January 27, 1977," 24.

60. Carter, "National Prayer Breakfast, January 27, 1977," 24.

61. Pippert, *The Spiritual Journey of Jimmy Carter*, 14.

62. See John H. Patton, "A Government as Good as its People: Jimmy Carter and the Restoration of Transcendence to Politics," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 63 (1977): 249-257; Christopher Lyle Johnstone, "Electing Ourselves in 1976: Jimmy Carter and the American Faith," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 42 (1978): 241-249; J. Louis Campbell III, "Jimmy Carter and the Rhetoric of Charisma," *Central States Speech Journal* 30 (1979): 174-186.

63. Carter, "National Prayer Breakfast, January 27, 1977," 24-25.

64. Jimmy Carter, "Report to the American People, Remarks from the White House Library, February 2, 1977," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977 Book I*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 70.

65. Carter, "Report to the American People, February 2, 1977," 71.

66. This contradiction did not escape the attention of journalists such as Karen Elliott House who opined that "The President's complex program of energy taxes and conservation didn't make much sense to a lot of Americans. If they were to accept higher energy prices, there had better be a good reason." See Karen Elliott House, "Carter's Cardigan Wasn't Enough," *Wall Street Journal* October 21, 1977, A14.

67. Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 97.

68. Jimmy Carter, "The Energy Problem, Address to the Nation, April 18, 1977," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977 Book I*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 656.

69. Carter, "The Energy Problem, April 18, 1977," 658.

70. Carter, "The Energy Problem, April 18, 1977," 659.

71. Carter, "The Energy Problem, April 18, 1977," 661.

72. I define apocalyptic as shrill warning with little or no hope to escape the coming calamities.

73. Carter, "The Energy Problem, April 18, 1977," 656.

74. Jimmy Carter, "National Energy Plan, Address Delivered Before a Joint Session of the Congress, April 20, 1977," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977 Book I*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1977), 663. In his presidential memoir Carter quipped that on this occasion, "Congress lived up to my expectations." See Carter, *Keeping Faith*, 98.

75. Carter, "National Energy Plan, April 20, 1977," 663-664.

76. Carter, "National Energy Plan, April 20, 1977," 666.

77. Jimmy Carter, "National Energy Plan, Address to the Nation, November 8, 1977," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1977 Book II*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1978), 1982.

78. Carter, "National Energy Plan, November 8, 1977," 1982.

79. Carter, "National Energy Plan, November 8, 1977," 1983.

80. Carter vocally chastised Congress in April of 1978 for failing to implement his energy proposal: "None of that [energy problems] has changed in the last year. All that has changed is that we have wasted 12 months of precious time." See Jimmy Carter, "National Energy Plan, Remarks Urging Congressional Action on the Plan, April 20, 1978," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1978 Book I* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), 763.

81. For an excellent analysis of these factors see Holland, "The Great Gamble," 63-79.

82. Rafshoon argued that a tone of "controlled outrage" toward Congress, oil companies, and OPEC would be appropriate. See Memorandum, Jerry Rafshoon to President Carter, April 2, 1979, "Memorandum for the President: Energy Speech," Staff Offices, Speechwriters CHRON File, Box 43, Jimmy Carter Library.

83. Jimmy Carter, "Energy, Address to the Nation, April 5, 1979," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Jimmy Carter, 1979 Book I* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), 609.

84. Carter, "Energy, April 5, 1979," 610.

85. Carter, "Energy, April 5, 1979," 611.

86. Carter, "Energy, April 5, 1979," 611-612.

87. Carter, "Energy, April 5, 1979," 612.

88. See Holland, "The Great Gamble," especially pp 65-71.

89. This course of action was discouraged by a number of officials in the Carter administration including Domestic Policy Adviser Stuart Eizenstat, Vice President Walter Mondale, and Secretary of Energy James Schlesinger. See Holland, "The Great Gamble," 65-68.

90. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1235.

91. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1235.

92. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1235.

93. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1235-1236. It must be noted that Carter possessed a penchant for openly voicing self criticism. In his campaign biography "Why Not the Best?" Carter wrote candidly about several of his weaknesses or "faults" as a presidential candidate—one of which included: "I don't know how to compromise on any principle I believe is right." See Jimmy Carter, *Why Not the Best?* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1975), 139.

94. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1236.

95. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1236.

96. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1237.

97. See Jim Cullen, *The American Dream: A Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5-10.
98. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1237.
99. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1237.
100. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1237.
101. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1241.
102. Carter, "Energy and National Goals, July 15, 1979," 1238.
103. Rafshoon's July 10<sup>th</sup> memorandum attempted to dissuade Carter from an in-depth discussion of the national malaise as advocated by Patrick Caddell. Rafshoon feared that such a strategy would only lead to "apocalyptic" consequences. While Rafshoon favored a broad and general discussion of the malaise and thought it appropriate to insert "a short mea culpa" for his mistakes which had exacerbated the crisis, he exhorted Carter to "be positive" and "not ramble on about the problems." See Memorandum, Jerry Rafshoon to President Carter, July 10, 1979, "Memorandum to the President," Staff Offices, Speechwriters CHRON File, Box 50, Jimmy Carter Library. Much of Rafshoon's memo originated from speechwriter Greg Schneiders. See Memorandum, Greg Schneiders to Jerry Rafshoon, July 10, 1979, "Memorandum for Jerry Rafshoon at Camp David: Address to Nation," Staff Offices Speechwriters CHRON File, Box 50, Jimmy Carter Library.
104. See Smith and Smith, "Political Jeremiads from the Bully Pulpit," 157; Holland, "The Great Gamble," 73.
105. Letter, Kenneth R. Strong to President Carter, July 17, 1979, Staff Offices, Cabinet Secretary and Intergovernmental Affairs, Box 32, Jimmy Carter Library.
106. See Hahn, "Flailing the Profligate," 583-587.
107. Smith and Smith, "Political Jeremiads from the Bully Pulpit," 162.
108. Quoted in Dan F. Hahn, "The Rhetoric of Jimmy Carter, 1976-1980," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 14 (1984): 265-288.
109. See Smith and Smith, "Political Jeremiads from the Bully Pulpit," 133-164; Hahn, "Flailing the Profligate," 583-587.
110. Stoda and Dionisopoulos, "Jeremiad at Harvard," 47.
111. Mary E. Stuckey, *The President as Interpreter-In-Chief* (Chatham: Chatham House Publishers, 1991), 1.
112. Perhaps this tendency of Carter's reflects what Margaret Zulick and James Darsey have argued about failure and the prophetic ethos. They claim that a prophet's personal failures can actually strengthen his or her ethos since the display of such personal failures has a way of reinforcing the notion that the prophet speaks for God and not for personal motives. See Zulick, "The Agon of Jeremiah," 140; James Darsey, "The Legend of Eugene Debs: Prophetic Ethos as Radical Argument," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* (1988): 434-452. In spite of this rhetorical prospect, this strengthened ethos either did not materialize in Carter's case or was unable to overcome the negative rhetorical effects of his energy jeremiad.

113. Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 33.

114. A complete text of Carter's candidacy announcement was obtained from the Jimmy Carter Presidential Library in Atlanta, GA. "Candidacy Announcement of Governor Jimmy Carter," December 12, 1974, copy in Carter Family Papers, Speech File 1964-1976, Box 61, Jimmy Carter Library.

115. Bill Bishop, "Jimmy Carter, Prophet: 12 Years Ago He Told the Truth. We Refused to Listen," *Charlotte Observer* July 14, 1991, B7.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE POWER OF AMERICAN PROMISE: THE POLITICAL

#### POSTMILLENNIALISM OF RONALD REAGAN'S ECONOMIC JEREMIAD

I've not taken your time this evening to merely ask you to trust me. Instead, I ask you to trust yourselves. That's what America is all about. Our struggle for nationhood, our unrelenting fight for freedom, our very existence—these have all rested on the assurance that you must be free to shape your life as you are best able to, that no one can stop you from reaching higher or take from you the creativity that has made America the envy of mankind. One road is timid and fearful; the other bold and hopeful. In these 6 months, we've done so much and have come so far. It's been the power of millions of people like you who have determined that we will make America great again. You have made the difference up to now. You will make the difference again. Let us not stop now.

Ronald Reagan<sup>1</sup>

Just four months after the culmination of Jimmy Carter's energy jeremiad, former Governor of California Ronald Wilson Reagan declared his presidential candidacy with a speech at the New York Hilton on November 13, 1979. Like most candidacy announcement speeches Reagan's was full of optimistic assessments of the American character and destiny—elements commensurate with the promise and prophecy elements of the jeremiad form.<sup>2</sup> Reagan opined that America was “a living, breathing presence, unimpressed by what others say is impossible, proud of its own success, . . . always impatient to provide a better life for its people in a framework of a basic fairness and freedom.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, not all was right with America. The indomitable American spirit was in danger, Reagan argued, not from an energy crisis or a crisis of public confidence, but from leaders who failed to grasp the greatness of America. With thinly veiled references to Jimmy Carter's energy jeremiad Reagan declared:

Much of this talk has come from leaders who claim that our problems are too difficult to handle. . . . They tell us we must learn to live with less, and



teach our children that their lives will be less full and prosperous than ours have been; that the America of the coming years will be a place where—because of our past excesses—it will be impossible to dream and make those dreams come true. . . . The crisis we face is not the result of any failure of the American spirit; it is a failure of our leaders to establish rational goals and give our people something to order their lives by.<sup>4</sup>

The failures of American leadership were most evident, Reagan argued, in the dilapidated state of the American economy which was suffering from inflation, unemployment, and a declining standard of living. The national economy might indeed have been in decline, but it was the nation's leaders who were responsible for it, not the American people: "The people have not created this disaster in our economy; the federal government has. It has overspent, overestimated, and over-regulated."<sup>5</sup>

As Carter before him, Reagan argued that the nation was indeed at an important crossroads which would define its collective destiny. Yet his outlook for the future was more confident than Carter's. Where Carter had expressed some doubts—apparently born of frustration—that the nation would overcome the energy crisis, Reagan invoking Massachusetts colonial governor John Winthrop's famous metaphor from Christ's Sermon on the Mount<sup>6</sup> confidently predicted that "we will become that shining city upon a hill."<sup>7</sup> Although presidential candidacy announcements are routinely characterized by such optimism, Reagan's was particularly idyllic. The remainder of this analysis will demonstrate that Reagan's optimism was not only apparent in his announcement speech, but in the rhetorical trajectory of the jeremiad he used to promote his economic recovery plan and its first and most definitive legislative component—the 1981 Economic Recovery and Tax Act (ERTA).

Reagan's rhetorical presidency has been a subject of intense interest for scholarly authors. This robust body of literature has produced two points of general consensus with

regard to Reagan's presidential rhetoric. First, it is widely understood that Reagan had a penchant for employing jeremiads throughout his presidential and pre-presidential rhetorical career.<sup>8</sup> Second, there is widespread consensus in both the academic and popular presses that Reagan's messages were thoroughly-laced with hopeful and optimistic themes.<sup>9</sup> This, however, creates a serious interpretive problem because biblical and Puritan-era jeremiads were typically used to chastise the covenant people for their failures. How can the rhetorical optimism of Reagan be reconciled with the often dark, moralistic tone of the American jeremiad?

One explanation for this convergence undoubtedly lies in the malleability of the jeremiad form. As this chapter and the preceding one demonstrate, the jeremiad was useful to both Carter and Reagan, but for different reasons. I argue that President Reagan's evolving economic jeremiad exhibited a consistent theme of political postmillennialism characterized by narrow declensions, and overwhelming emphasis upon the promise and prophecy elements of the jeremiad. Reagan used these elements to herald the coming fulfillment of American greatness provided the proper actions were taken. These actions, Reagan argued, included the passage and implementation of substantial tax and budget cuts and the elimination of some government regulations upon business called for in the ERTA. I will also note that, despite its narrow declension, the postmillennial trajectory of Reagan's more sanguine jeremiad still served as a bitter rebuke to his socio-political opponents who, according to his rhetoric, were the dangerous enemies of the great shining city, threatening its very existence. I will begin by recalling the basic elements of the American jeremiad form which make it a plausible rhetorical counterpart to a postmillennial rhetorical trajectory. This chapter then analyzes Reagan's

performance of this jeremiad in support of the 1981 ERTA along with his assessments of the recovery efforts in his second inaugural in 1985, his 1988 (farewell) speech to the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, and his farewell address to the nation in January of 1989. Finally, I will discuss why Reagan's economic jeremiad—regardless of the mixed success of his economic stimulus program—ultimately proved to be an influential shibboleth in American political rhetoric.

### **The Postmillennial American Jeremiad**

As noted in the previous chapter the American jeremiad is among the most powerful, ubiquitous, and yet, according to erudite historian Perry Miller, “confused” religious rhetorical forms in American political discourse.<sup>10</sup> The inherent confusion of the jeremiad form arises from the complex historical and theological factors operant in American colonial history. Fancying themselves a type of ancient Israel, the Puritans interpreted their migration to the New World as an exodus from the religious and political corruption (bondage) of Europe. The exodus to North America was for far more than their personal or spiritual liberation. In bringing them out of Europe the Almighty established covenantal expectations of them as his chosen people. God intended, the Puritans believed, for their divine “errand into the wilderness” (as Samuel Danforth later called it<sup>11</sup>) to result in the eventual redemption of the entire world but especially England. This collective belief resulted in perhaps the closest thing to an actual social contract that has ever existed in America—a colonial theocracy in covenant with the Almighty and bound to each other as well by the obligations of said covenant. As historian Sacvan Bercovitch explains this covenant was akin to “a marriage bond” and, for the Puritans, it revealed the entire reason for their existence in the world.<sup>12</sup>

The theological and psychological problems with this grandiose vision came when the Puritans attempted to realize their lofty ambitions in the often harsh American wilderness. Although they were utterly convinced of their status as a chosen people, they were perplexed when God allowed them to be afflicted with Indian wars, famine, drought, and the like.<sup>13</sup> The only logical conclusion, they reasoned, was that sin was among them—surely they collectively, or at least certain individuals within the community, had offended the Almighty and broken the covenant in some way. In a 1679 Synod, Massachusetts Puritan congregations actually enumerated the offenses they believed to be threatening the survival of their colony: lack of proper religious devotion topped the list followed by, swearing, falling asleep during religious services, dressing too ornately, drunkenness, and sexual promiscuity to name a few.<sup>14</sup> As such, Puritan clergy developed regularly-delivered ritualized sermon types specifically calculated to call the community back into the proper covenantal relationship with God. Accordingly, the sermons delivered on community artillery days, fast days, thanksgiving days and election days were developed as rhetorical subgenres which endeavored to do just that.<sup>15</sup> These sermons were quite remarkable in their consistent employment of the jeremiad form as a corrective calculated to challenge the community with its current shortcomings and recommend immediate action to restore the covenant.<sup>16</sup> Even in those rare times of tenuous peace when they were not trying to annihilate their Native America neighbors or in seasons of economic prosperity when all appeared to be well, the community was exhorted to be particularly watchful that it did not commit the mortal sins of pride and spiritual complacency.<sup>17</sup>

While the acerbic declensions of colonial-era jeremiads could be quite harsh, they were all based upon the ultimate assumption that positive change was not only possible, but foreordained. As Sacvan Bercovitch explains, the denunciations had a positive purpose—one which was only further evidence of the special quality of the community's covenantal relationship with God: "The purpose of their jeremiads was to direct an imperiled people of God toward the fulfillment of their destiny, to guide them individually toward salvation, and collectively toward the American city of God."<sup>18</sup>

Despite the fact that in Puritan society "the elect distinguished themselves by their dread of failure, by continual contrition and repentance,"<sup>19</sup> Bercovitch convincingly argues that the Puritans interpreted their migration to New England as yet another chapter in God's ongoing narrative of human redemption. "Their rhetoric" he writes, "opens out into a literal-prophetic historiography which unites the Reformation thrust and the history of redemption. . . . It was reserved for the American Puritans to give the kingdom of God a local habitation and a name."<sup>20</sup> Cultural historian Ernest Lee Tuveson writes that this originally Puritan idea became one of the dominant motifs of American rhetoric and literature—allowing Americans from the colonial era to the present day to see themselves as both the perfection of God's plan on Earth and the chosen instruments used by God to prosecute the divine work of socio-political (and therefore spiritual) redemption across the globe.<sup>21</sup> As such, the "chosen nation" (or various communities within it) may be subject to the corrective motives of the jeremiad, but such jeremiads must (unlike Jimmy Carter's) end on a hopeful, expectant note to maintain fidelity to the assertion of divine destiny.

Aside from occasioning a lively debate among history scholars,<sup>22</sup> such relatively optimistic interpretations of the jeremiad demand serious investigation of the degree to which the same rhetorical form can be used by various rhetors under different auspices to either praise and preserve or denounce a community. Historian David Howard-Pitney's exploration of the jeremiads used by African-American rhetors such as Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, and Martin Luther King, in pursuit of civil rights revealed jeremiads which greatly "vacillated with regard to America's perfectibility."<sup>23</sup> King's jeremiads, for instance, evolved along a moralistic trajectory which would have culminated in a sermon entitled "Why America May Go to Hell"—a sermon King would have delivered on Sunday April 7, 1968 had he not been assassinated on April 4.<sup>24</sup> While several communication studies have observed the jeremiad's potential to either uphold or challenge the status quo,<sup>25</sup> there remains a need for a more nuanced understanding of how conservative jeremiads should be differentiated from corrective jeremiads.

Several studies have explored Reagan's use of the jeremiad in economic discourse. Amos Kiewe and Davis Houck offer an impressive study of every major economic speech by Reagan, yet their analysis fails to explain precisely how Reagan used a judgmental rhetorical form to expound increasingly optimistic themes.<sup>26</sup> Richard L. Johannesen's study of Reagan's economic jeremiad acknowledges that his economic jeremiad constituted a "balancing of lamentation with optimism" and that this was a typical feature of Reagan's rhetoric.<sup>27</sup> The analysis of Reagan's jeremiad in this chapter seeks to contribute to the findings of these earlier studies by explaining how Reagan executed this balance by employing the themes of political postmillennialism in his

economic discourse. As such, this chapter provides a more complex reading of Reagan's economic rhetoric than have these studies because it allows us to not only accurately identify Reagan's rhetorical form as the jeremiad, but charting its specific features such as its description of (1) progressive improvement steadily achieved not by government, but by the people themselves, and (2) the prediction of a glorious future wherein the American promise would be fulfilled in spite of the existence of highly-motivated opponents and contrary evidence about the success of Reagan's economic program.

Because I argue that Reagan's jeremiad was postmillennial in its trajectory, it is important to carefully define this term before proceeding. In traditional Christian eschatology one finds several different approaches to understanding the end times: amillennialism, premillennialism and postmillennialism. While each of these approaches is more complicated in actual practice than the space for this discussion will allow here, all of these approaches are concerned with the role of the millennium—a period of a thousand years of peace and tranquility wherein the lion shall lay down with the lamb, the implements of war will be useful only for legitimate commerce, and God Almighty (or his representatives in the postmillennial view) literally reigns upon the Earth.<sup>28</sup>

Amillennialism, the belief in no earthly millennial at all, has important standing in Christian history as the oldest of these millennial views. Jesus' immediate disciples believed that their Lord's return was imminent and were therefore unconcerned about long-term millennial theology—a view that began to change as the centuries went by. This amillennial view of the early disciples was largely shared by no less than St. Augustine of Hippo whose classic work *City of God* proclaimed that the cities of God and man were distinct and that the inherent sinfulness of humanity precluded any such

millennial paradise because “human nature as a whole would have to be miraculously transformed first.”<sup>29</sup> However, the decline of this degree of millennial skepticism throughout the centuries eventually gave rise to the premillennial and postmillennial views. As such the influence of amillennialism has declined considerably.

Premillennialism on the other hand is decidedly more influential and is perhaps the dominant view among contemporary evangelical Protestants.<sup>30</sup> As the moniker implies, premillennialists believe that Jesus Christ will return to Earth to retrieve his followers prior to the establishment of his actual millennial reign upon the Earth. This view, which is further complicated by competing doctrines of whether the rapture will occur prior to, in the middle of, or after the seven-year period known as “the great tribulation,” largely predominates in both the multi-million-dollar-a-year book and film industries that cater to contemporary evangelicals<sup>31</sup> and in the pulpits of such congregations since the early 1900s.<sup>32</sup> While a number of variations exist, premillennialism presents a decidedly dark, apocalyptic, view of the future. As historian Emmanuel Sivan writes, it is a “message of messianic redemption following an imminent worldwide catastrophe . . . .”<sup>33</sup> While interpretations about when and how such a catastrophe will occur vary widely, the fact that major evangelical figures such as Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Hal Lindsey and others have written and preached extensively on premillennial teachings is strong evidence of the influence of premillennialism in contemporary evangelical culture. As sociologist Susan Harding observes “most Bible-believing Protestants in America are premillennialists of one sort or another.”<sup>34</sup>



Postmillennialism is the most optimistic of these views. It is predicated upon the idea that Christ will return to Earth after the completion of the millennium; hence, the name postmillennialism. This can only happen through the work of the Church since Christ can only return “at the end of an essentially progressive millennium of human rule.”<sup>35</sup> In contrast to the premillennialist view, postmillennialism envisioned the kingdom of God coming to Earth by degrees, guided by the spirit of God to be sure, but ultimately achieved through a human agency. As Jean B. Quandt summarizes: “the kingdom of God would be gradually realized in this world; justice, peace and love would eventually reign supreme. . . . postmillennialism believed in the gradual redemption of the world under the influence of Christ’s spirit rather than his physical presence.”<sup>36</sup> The optimism and dependency upon human agency espoused in postmillennialism made it quite palatable for both religiously-minded socio-political progressives like Charles Grandison Finney, Henry Ward Beecher, Washington Gladden and Josiah Strong. It was similarly attractive to those such as John Dewey who were comparatively less inclined to see religion as a cure for social ills.<sup>37</sup> The vision of a global utopia achieved by human effort and compassionate good works was and remains appealing to many.

The optimism and belief in the perfectibility of society via human agency elements of postmillennialism remain alive and well today thanks to the emergence of the Religious Right as a powerful force in American politics. Evangelicals once distrusted political involvement and regarded efforts to improve government and society as largely futile since the present world would likely be destroyed in the cataclysmic events before Christ’s return anyway. But since the late 1970s, conservative evangelicals have demanded treatment as a valuable political constituency via organizations like Jerry

Falwell's Moral Majority. Like nineteenth and early twentieth century progressives, these groups care about social issues—particularly ones such as school prayer, abortion, and gay rights, which they perceive to pertain to the preservation of “American values” and the status of the family.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly, contemporary evangelicals are largely premillennial in their theology, but have somewhat curiously adopted a postmillennial orientation toward political engagement.

Postmillennialism may also be found in the pre-presidential rhetoric of Ronald Reagan. While a number of studies acknowledge Reagan's use of jeremiads and apocalyptic discourse in his pre-political rhetorical career, only one has even suggested a postmillennial influence upon Reagan's rhetoric. In an analysis of Reagan's 1964 televised campaign speech for Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater entitled “A Time for Choosing,” Kurt Ritter posits that this famous speech employed both premillennial and postmillennial elements. Reagan's speech was apocalyptic, Ritter explains, in that Reagan warned his audience that doom threatened to befall the nation if it did not change course quickly.<sup>39</sup> Ritter argues that Reagan's framing of expanding government power as a lament over America's threatened liberty, which he defined as an impending crisis clothed in the language of good versus evil was heavily influenced by apocalyptic elements. Yet, Reagan hardly believed all to be lost. “Even in his darkest passages of apocalyptic language,” Ritter notes “Reagan held out hope that Americans could alter history, that they could turn back the tide of liberalism.”<sup>40</sup> Ritter's contention of postmillennial influence in this speech is evident in passages such as the following:

You and I have a rendezvous with destiny. We'll preserve for our children this, the last best hope of man on earth, or we'll sentence them to take the last step into a thousand years of darkness. We will keep in mind and remember that Barry Goldwater has faith in us. He has faith that you and I have the

ability and the dignity and the right to make our own decisions and determine our own destiny.<sup>41</sup>

However, Ritter's gives scant attention to the role postmillennialism may have played in Reagan's presidential discourse. This chapter delves more deeply into Reagan's economic jeremiad, demonstrating its postmillennial trajectory,<sup>42</sup> and discussing the greater efficacy of Reagan's use of the jeremiad in comparison to Jimmy Carter.

### **Ronald Reagan's Postmillennial Jeremiad**

Unlike Jimmy Carter's inaugural address, Reagan's held nothing back in his condemnation of the public sin of relying upon big government and how it caused the economic problems which, he argued, threatened the very existence of the nation. Days before his First inaugural, Reagan and his communication staff headed by chief speechwriter Kenneth L. Khachigian evinced both a concern for and understanding of how images would contribute to his message. For one thing, Reagan aides let it be known to reporters on several occasions that Reagan himself was the rhetorical force behind the address. "The real bottom line is that he wrote it out." reported one aide: "He drafted the damn thing."<sup>43</sup> In the post-Watergate era where public distrust of politicians and those who helped them craft rhetorical messages still abounded, the image of a "citizen-politician" (as Reagan often described himself) drafting his own inaugural was politically expedient. Widely-distributed photos of Reagan sitting at his desk, surrounded by a flurry of papers, while scratching out his own inaugural on a legal pad solidified the "citizen-politician goes to Washington" image.<sup>44</sup> The imagery contributed to the prophetic ethos he sought for his first inaugural. As communication scholars James Darsey and Margaret D. Zulick each explain in separate works the legitimacy of a prophet's ethos is often expressed in their emergence from the wilderness of isolation and self-denial where

suffering allows the prophet to be imbued with God's message for the people.<sup>45</sup> Although Reagan certainly did not face the physical privations common to biblical prophets while drafting his inaugural, one report noted that he had "secluded himself in his Pacific Palisades home" so that he could "work[ed] at a desk amid a home barren of most furniture" which had already been moved to the White House.<sup>46</sup>

Reagan's prophetic inaugural message was certainly not for the faint of heart. Indeed, his sobering address not only indicated that the nation's economy was in trouble, but suggested that the American economic crisis was a consequence of the great national political sin of having allowed the government to expand beyond its appropriate realm.

As Reagan famously opined near the beginning of the address:

In this present crisis, government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem. From time to time we've been tempted to believe that society has become too complex to be managed by self-rule, that government by an elite group is superior to government for, by, and of the people. But if no one among us is capable of governing himself, then who among us has the capacity to govern someone else?<sup>47</sup>

Despite these warnings, Reagan's message could have been much stronger, yet probably less effective, if he had included a broader and tougher declension far more critical of the American public. In the initial draft of the inaugural the line about government as the problem was preceded by the assertion that excessive reliance upon the government was a byproduct of the desperate years of the Great Depression but that in the ensuing decades the government's reach had "gone too far, threatening to upset that delicate balance"<sup>48</sup> of the American federal system. The American public was not guilty of any actual moral/spiritual transgressions as Jimmy Carter indicated in his July 15, 1979 energy speech, but of a political sin.

The initial draft also featured a startlingly apocalyptic warning about the intrusion of government into the lives and privacy of ordinary Americans: “The founders clearly understood the perils of power vested so heavily in the state. That peril is even greater in modern times. For the era of the complex society, of advanced communications and technology, has given to government a sweeping new dimension of power and even greater capacity for mischief.”<sup>49</sup> This Orwellian description of governmental power did not, of course, survive the drafting process. Nevertheless, it illustrates that the deep distrust of government Reagan evinced in his pre-presidential rhetoric certainly remained with him as he entered the Oval Office. Despite the distrust of government ingrained in Reagan’s conservative ideology, the difference between this initial draft and the final product indicates a willingness to both sacrifice some of the more radical elements of his conservative message in order to project a more optimistic prophetic ethos and narrow the focus of his declension by ultimately blaming the government rather than the polis for America’s political sin. These early rhetorical choices formulated the foundation of what would become the postmillennial trajectory of much of his economic rhetoric.

The nation’s economic problems were quite significant, Reagan explained, but the answers were relatively simple—matters of resolute action rather than deliberation. First, based upon the conservative ideological notion that “We are a nation that has a government—not the other way around” Reagan pledged to “curb the size and influence of the Federal establishment” which, he argued, would restore proper balance to the federal system and would maximize individual liberty.<sup>50</sup> Reagan seemed to live up to this pledge by announcing a federal employee hiring freeze just hours after the inaugural. In addition to this tangible policy step Reagan argued, in what may have been a subtle swipe

at Carter, that the key to solving these economic problems and renewing the national covenant lay in rekindling American optimism: As he explained the country needed to “believe in ourselves and . . . in our capacity to perform great deeds, to believe that together with God’s help we can and will resolve the problems which now confront us.”<sup>51</sup>

President Carter had similarly called Americans to rekindle their faith in American promise in his infamous energy speech of July 15, 1979. However, Carter’s call for hope also came with a health dose of collective blame combined with calls to patriotically sacrifice and conserve energy. Reagan’s call was quite different. He went out of his way to explain that no heroic sacrifice would be necessary on the part of average Americans, but that their best efforts at reinstituting a generalized public optimism would be sufficient to meet the present crisis.

As Bruce Gronbeck wrote of the speech, “Reagan was grim but not despondent.”<sup>52</sup> The problems were significant and the nation was under threat, but Reagan predicted that things would get better and argued that such hope was a fundamental component of the American character. As Reagan stated, “And after all, why shouldn’t we believe that? We are Americans.”<sup>53</sup> The dominant god and devil terms Reagan used in this address bear out its optimistic postmillennial rhetorical trajectory. Reagan prized the “individual” American who, when allowed to do so, enabled the nation to “prosper[ed] as no other people on Earth.”<sup>54</sup> Reagan saw the individual American as an heroic figure “going in and out of factory gates,” a noble farmer able to “produce enough food to feed all of us and then the world beyond,” as both a producer and consumer engaged in the commerce of capitalism, and heroic “individuals and families” who

supported the government and society—all of whom were possessed of a “quite, but deep” patriotism and “values [which] sustain our national life.”<sup>55</sup>

Reagan’s story also had a villain. “Government,” or rather the tendency of government to grow, was far more than the problem; it was a ubiquitous and ominous obstacle to economic vitality because it stifled the creativity and prosperity of individuals. “It is no coincidence,” Reagan argued “that our present troubles parallel and are proportionate to the intervention and intrusion in our lives that result from unnecessary and excessive growth of government. . . . we’re too great a nation to limit ourselves to small dreams.”<sup>56</sup> Reagan’s use of “government” as a devil term allowed his jeremiad to target something as the source for the nation’s economic woes without pronouncing judgment upon the whole nation (as Carter did in his energy jeremiad) and without indicting any one person or group as being responsible for the economic stagnation. As Craig Allen Smith observes, much of Reagan’s policy rhetoric was characterized “by a lack of domestic adversaries.”<sup>57</sup> That is to say that Reagan’s economic jeremiad throughout his two terms in office featured a narrow declension, which sometimes blamed nobody at all except for a shadowy projection of a nameless, faceless adversary—in the case of his inaugural, government. While a few of Reagan’s subsequent economic speeches in support of passage of the 1981 ERTA did name a particular adversary, his inaugural helped establish his basic practice of using a jeremiad which did not blame the general public which was, in Reagan’s view, populated with individual heroes.

Despite the powerful constitutive elements inherent to presidential inaugurals, much of Reagan’s policy-making and rhetorical work remained to be done. Accordingly,

Reagan spent much of the rest of 1981 addressing the topic of economic recovery via a progressively-optimistic postmillennial jeremiad. This campaign began with his first major televised address to the nation on February 5, 1981. Of course, like any postmillennial message, the upward progression toward eventual perfection must begin in the imperiled and imperfect present. Likewise, Reagan began in this somewhat un-Reagan-like manner by declaring to the nation that it was “in the worst economic mess since the Great Depression.”<sup>58</sup> Reagan explained that:

A few days ago I was presented with a report I’d asked for, a comprehensive audit, if you will, of our economic condition. You won’t like it. I didn’t like it. But we have to face the truth and then go to work to turn things around. And make no mistake about it, we can turn them around.<sup>59</sup>

Archival materials from the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library cast some doubt on Reagan’s reporting of the timeline for his receipt of the report and the subtle implication that he would not have known the report’s content in advance. Weeks before his first inaugural, Reagan received a memorandum from former Nixon speechwriter Ray Price. Price counseled the president-elect to refrain from announcing the explicit details of a “supply-side expansionist or belt-tightening austerity” economic recovery plan in the inaugural address.<sup>60</sup> Explaining that announcement of Reagan’s already-formulated economic program would be premature since “the Inaugural has to unify,” Price offered that waiting “a decent interval, and then do[ing] it before a joint session of Congress” would enhance the policy’s credibility:

specific programmatic recommendations come with greater authority from the Executive Branch than from transition task forces. Anything announced immediately on taking office will be seen as the product of transition task forces; those that come a little later will be seen as the product of the Executive Branch, with its resources and responsibilities.<sup>61</sup>



Although it seems unlikely that Reagan's choice to wait "a decent interval" was a direct result of the advice of the former Nixon speechwriter, Price's memo coupled with the ideological consistency between the economic "audit" and Reagan's inaugural indicates that Reagan carefully chose to initiate his economic recovery jeremiad in a way which would maximize his prophetic ethos as he explicated the seriousness of the economic crisis and the principle reasons for it.

The remainder of the exordium spelled out the nation's economic problems in vivid statistical detail: an \$80 billion budget deficit, a 528% increase in the federal budget, crippling inflation in 1979 and 1980 at 13.3% and 12.4% respectively, and nearly 7 million Americans unemployed. Reagan further explained that Americans were saving far less of their income than their counterparts in West Germany or Japan, that home ownership was becoming far more financially burdensome for average families, and that government regulations on the auto industry had added \$666 to the price of a new car. While each of these statistics illustrated a whole set of complex and often inter-related economic problems, Reagan suggested that the ultimate responsibility for each lay at the encroaching feet of the increasingly-powerful federal government. "I'm sure you're getting the idea" he wryly reported "that the audit presented to me found government policies of the last few decades responsible for our economic troubles."<sup>62</sup>

At first, Reagan seemed to blame the entire American population in a broad Jimmy Carter-style declension when he pointedly announced: "We forgot or just overlooked the fact that government—any government—has a built-in tendency to grow."<sup>63</sup> However, Reagan's framing of even this one instance of broad national declension was largely self-diffused since "we all had a hand in looking to government

for benefits as if government had some source of revenue other than our earnings.”<sup>64</sup>

Reagan traced this history of the nation’s fall into the seductive arms of big government since the economically-robust post-WWII years noting that although the nation had prospered in the form of higher wages and a vastly-improved standard of living, the specter of inflation “like radioactivity, was cumulative” and had since gotten “out of control.”<sup>65</sup>

Reagan argued that the deleterious effects of the federal government’s growth were now stifling major components of the national economy like the auto industry and American steel production where, because of the excessive but well-meaning regulations imposed by the government, American workers were being greatly out-produced. “Now, this isn’t because they’re better workers” Reagan was quick to add “But we have to give them [American workers] the tools and equipment that workers in the other industrial nations have.”<sup>66</sup> These deficiencies of the industrial sector were, of course, the result of “punitive tax policies” “excessive and unnecessary regulations” and “government borrowing” which diminished industrial capital.<sup>67</sup>

For Reagan the policy-level solution to the national decline was simple—taxes and government spending both had to be cut. The particulars of his strategy were to be found in the economic plan he promised to introduce before Congress two weeks later. The plan included cuts to a number of government programs which would help the government reform its “wasteful ways” and meet its “legitimate responsibilities.”<sup>68</sup> Tax cuts were the central aspect of Reagan’s plan to renew the national covenant. Cutting the tax rate would not only provide individuals with more disposable income and the industrial sector with badly-needed capital, it would also check what Reagan perceived to

be the ultimate source of all of these problems by constraining and reversing the expansion of the federal government. As he put it: “we can lecture our children about extravagance until we run out of voice and breath. Or we can cure their extravagance by simply reducing their allowance.”<sup>69</sup> Apparently the government was behaving like an ungrateful and disobedient teenager insofar as its tax and economic policies were concerned.

Remedies in the form of large-scale tax and economic reforms had to be pursued immediately. The nation had successfully “stalled the judgment day” but such delay was no longer an option—time was simply running out.<sup>70</sup> This feint toward the potentially-apocalyptic consequences of failing to enact his economic reforms was an early prophetic warning which helped initiate a rhetorical campaign characterized by increasingly-optimistic assessments of the nation’s economy. As Ritter and Henry characterize it, Reagan was able to “shift the emphasis of his jeremiad” from “a pessimistic assessment of how far America had drifted from her original covenant of limited government” to “an optimistic and forward-looking prediction of a golden age of prosperity and freedom that would come to America as a reward for restoring that covenant.”<sup>71</sup>

Reagan ended the February 5<sup>th</sup> speech in dramatic fashion enacting the type of prophetic choice common to biblical and Puritan-era jeremiads:

We can leave our children with an unrepayable massive debt and a shattered economy, or we can leave them liberty in a land where every individual has the opportunity to be whatever God intended us to be. All it takes is a little common sense and recognition of our own ability. Together we can forge a new beginning for America.<sup>72</sup>

Of course, what Reagan meant by “common sense” and “our own ability” was his own economic prescription for America, many components of which were articulated long

before he took office. Former Reagan economic adviser Martin Anderson, for instance, reported in his 1990 memoir entitled *Revolution* that Reagan's plan to halt inflation and jumpstart economic growth through a combination of tax cuts and a reduction in federal regulations governing business was circulated throughout the campaign as "Policy Memorandum No. 1" in August of 1979.<sup>73</sup> These notions were not simply a twinkle in eye of candidate Reagan, but were settled socio-economic convictions from which Reagan and his advisers shaped economic policy upon his election to the presidency. In effect, they were articles of faith for Reagan and his administration even before assuming office.

Reagan substantially repeated his message from the February 5<sup>th</sup> economic address to the nation before a joint session of Congress thirteen days later on February 18, 1981. Despite the grimness of his warnings, the address showed signs of the emergence of a more hopeful outlook for the American economy. "There's nothing wrong with our internal strengths" he told the Congress, but "we have failed [the system] through a lack of confidence" and through the belief that government tinkering alone could right the nation's economic problems.<sup>74</sup> The statement was a telling one as it reflected Reagan's unshakable confidence in the soundness of America's democratic capitalist system which was at the core of his economic jeremiad even at its darkest moments.

The system Reagan envisioned however was rhetorically situated in his poetic retelling of the nation's idyllic past. This aspect of Reagan's early economic jeremiad came through most clearly on March 30, 1981 in a speech to the Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO at the Washington, D.C. Hilton. He

invoked the name and philosophy of labor leader Samuel Gompers who cautioned that socio-political philanthropy must never overcome individual initiative. “We’ve strayed far from the path that was charted by this man who believed so much in the freedom and dignity of the worker” Reagan opined “We are in today’s economic mess precisely because our leaders have forgotten that we built this great Nation on rewarding the work ethic instead of punishing it.”<sup>75</sup> Reagan accurately perceived the rhetorical value of identifying Gompers as a hero of both the American labor movement and a proponent of the type of rugged, self-sufficient individualism which Reagan believed to be at the core of the American soul. This rhetorical coupling enabled Reagan to argue to the assembled AFL-CIO members that “You believe in a work ethic but subsidize a government that does not.”<sup>76</sup> Again, Reagan only mildly chided the public for putting its faith in government with its impersonal “computers . . . organization charts, policies, and systems” but quickly concluded that “I think it’s about time that we placed trust in ourselves.”<sup>77</sup> In short, the nation could “surmount our problems, and . . . accomplish the goals that we all seek”<sup>78</sup> by changing course and adopting a set of economic reforms which would enable the people to tap into their historic strengths and reaffirm the socio-economic potential of America.

Reagan’s speech to the Building and Construction Trades Department of the AFL-CIO certainly did not bring to a close his economic jeremiad, but merely the opening—and most apocalyptic—phase of it. Reagan’s first inaugural, his address to the nation on February 5, 1981, the address to Congress on February 18, 1981, and his speech to the AFL-CIO convention all described an inherently good nation that had gone astray from its first principles and was suffering the socio-economic consequences of that

declension. Yet, the only real villain identified in even this darkest phase of the Reagan economic jeremiad was the ubiquitous evil figure of the encroaching federal government. After March 30, 1981, Reagan's economic rhetoric would become increasingly-optimistic—more and more reflective of the political postmillennialism he seemed to favor. A few Reagan biographers have suggested that this growing presidential optimism may have been influenced by Reagan's brush with death that same day after having been shot in the chest by John Hinckley Jr. as he left the Hilton.<sup>79</sup> While I have no intentions of evaluating the degree to which Reagan may have derived a sense of personal mission in the wake of this assassination attempt, the remainder of this chapter will suggest that his increasing optimism emanated from the fact that Reagan, like any good storyteller, understood that the unfolding drama of American renewal had to begin in conflict and peril but ultimately progress toward a fulfillment of American potential.

Less than one month after the failed assassination attempt, Reagan resumed his rhetorical push for economic reform by addressing a joint session of Congress on April 28, 1981. After receiving a boisterous welcome, Reagan embarked upon a discussion about the wonderful qualities of American society. After relating the humorous anecdote of a young boy who wrote to him "I hope you get well quick or you might have to make a speech in your pajamas," Reagan provided a gentle fatherly rebuke to those who opined that the attempt on his life was evidence of America as a "sick society."<sup>80</sup>

Well, sick societies don't produce men like the two who recently returned from outer space. Sick societies don't produce young men like Secret Service agent Tim McCarthy, who placed his body between mine and the man with the gun simply because he felt that's what his duty called for him to do. Sick societies don't produce dedicated police officers like Tom Delahanty or able and devoted public servants like Jim Brady. Sick societies don't make people like us so proud to be Americans and so very proud of our fellow citizens.<sup>81</sup>

While this aside could be dismissed as nothing more than a leisurely rhetorical detour calculated to thank those who had helped save his life and express concern for those who were injured in the line of fire, the final sentence of this section revealed a crucial component of Reagan's economic jeremiad. Any society possessed of the inherent virtue Reagan described would certainly be willing and able to do the work necessary to get its economic house in order and reclaim its endangered individualism and economic vitality from the government he believed to be its principle threat.

Although American society was not sick, its economy still was in Reagan's estimation. Reagan used his brush with death to draw attention to his economic jeremiad. Although his health had been "much improved" he wished he could "say that with regard to the health of our economy."<sup>82</sup> Reagan spent a good deal of the uncharacteristically brief (only about 15 minutes—short for Reagan) address speaking of the economic "sickness" which had afflicted the nation and the "cure" which could be provided by his proposed legislation which sought to cut taxes, eliminate certain federal regulations, and cut the budget by \$140 billion.<sup>83</sup> Reagan's sickness metaphor was important to his jeremiad for two reasons. First, as his appearance that evening had enabled him to enact,<sup>84</sup> recovery was quite possible provided that the proper steps were taken. As in the treatment of any sickness, the appropriate steps included a prescribed course of action (Reagan's proposal) and the indication that the treatment had to begin immediately. Reagan promised that the appropriate steps were forthcoming as his administration and the Republicans in Congress were formulating the legislative response that would become the Economic Recovery and Tax Act of 1981. In effect, his message was that

although there were some obstacles to overcome, the alternative proposal favored by the Democratically-controlled House Budget Committee, relief was on the way.

Despite the old political adage that one should never allow the general public to see either laws or sausages while they are being made, Reagan allowed the public a glimpse into how the economic cure was being formulated. Indicative of his increasingly-optimistic rhetoric, he noted that his work with Congress had been largely productive and that they had “come a long distance in less than 3 months” and that the two parties had “communicated in a spirit of candor, openness, and mutual respect.”<sup>85</sup> He described few actual details of the two proposals under consideration but did name them—one he coldly referred to as the “measure offered by the House Budget Committee” and the other he proudly heralded as the “bipartisan measure” sponsored by Congressman Republican Phil Gramm from Texas and Democrat Del Latta from Ohio.<sup>86</sup> The bipartisan measure would, he reported, “achieve all the essential elements of controlling government spending, reducing the tax burden, building a national defense second to none, and stimulating economic growth and creating millions of new jobs.”<sup>87</sup>

The Democratic alternative was, as Reagan insisted, really no alternative at all since it did not adequately cut general spending but simultaneously cut far too much (\$14 billion) from the defense budget. In short, this alternative was nothing more than “an echo of the past” with its “High taxes and excess spending growth [which] created our present economic mess . . . .”<sup>88</sup> As such, Reagan suggested that the adoption of the House Budget Committee proposal would not cure the disease, but would cause the economy to regress in its illness. It seemed to matter little to Reagan that both of these proposals were still in their formative stages—or that the House Budget Committee bill would give



Reagan about “75 percent”<sup>89</sup> of what he sought in the bipartisan measure. He still argued emphatically for his economic prescription.

Reagan’s sickness metaphor was also important to his postmillennial jeremiad in that it suggested that the economic cure would ultimately come from the people, not from Reagan or any members of Congress. Reagan claimed that the bipartisan proposal under consideration was based upon “the message of last November 4<sup>th</sup>. That message was very simple. Our government is too big, and it spends too much.”<sup>90</sup> While it is common for politicians to claim a ‘mandate’ from an election, contextually speaking, Reagan’s was rhetorically-consistent because he argued that it was ultimately the people—the “everyday heroes” as he had referred to them in his first inaugural—who were curing the nation’s economic maladies themselves. The central components of what would eventually become the ERTA largely-reflected Reagan’s long-held conservative philosophy. Nevertheless, he continually employed his postmillennial economic jeremiad in such a way that the American people, rather than he, were portrayed as the ultimate force driving his political decisions.

Reagan’s penchant for creating rhetorical linkage between his political ideals and the public will enabled him to describe the national past in idyllic terms and forecast a future time when the American promise would be realized. The conclusion of his April 28, 1981 speech to Congress featured Reagan’s invocation of the bravery of recently-returned space shuttle *Columbia* astronauts John Young and Bob Crippen, and the advice of American literary legend Carl Sandburg who wrote “Nothing happens unless first a dream.”<sup>91</sup> The bravery and optimism of these Americans led Reagan to conclude that despite the economic crisis: “we have much greatness before us.”<sup>92</sup> Reagan’s next major

national address in support of his economic recovery legislation would continue this theme and argue that the nation was indeed on the verge of a glorious new era.

In the months of proposals and counter-proposals between the administration and Congress, Reagan eventually abandoned the Gramm-Latta version of reform legislation he had heralded in April as the “bipartisan measure” in favor of one sponsored by Republican Barber Conable of New York and Democrat Kent Hance of Texas. The new version was remarkably similar to its predecessor, except that it arranged for its tax cuts to take effect with the beginning of the next fiscal year (October 1, 1981) rather than July 1, 1981 as proposed by the Gramm-Latta measure.<sup>93</sup> The Reagan administration employed nothing less than a full-court-press to win the impending congressional vote on this crucial component of its economic recovery package in late July of 1981.

While they used every weapon in the political arsenal to lobby Congress, they also understood that Reagan’s talent for direct communication with the public would be crucial to their efforts. With this in mind, Reagan addressed the nation from the Oval Office on July 27, 1981. He began by assuring American seniors of the soundness of the Social Security system rather than talking about the economy. Such reassurances were necessary because of the administration’s May 1981 proposal attempting to drastically reduce social security benefits in order to trim the federal budget. That proposal was so strongly-rebuffed by the Senate in a 96-0 vote that the administration quickly and quietly abandoned the effort.<sup>94</sup> Public fears over the prospect of similar attempts to cut social security had grown enough that summer that it required Reagan to address them with a strong denial at the outset of this important economic speech.

Turning to the central topic of the evening, Reagan recalled his stark jeremiad from February of 1981 and commented that his own message had been “grim and disturbing.”<sup>95</sup> There would be little of that in this address. Although he reminded the national audience that the economy was “still not out of the woods,” he suggested that something grand had already been accomplished, additional successful reform was imminent—and ultimately they the people were responsible for it. “Your voices have been heard” he proclaimed “millions of you, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents, from every profession, trade and line of work, and from every part of this land. You sent a message that you wanted a new beginning.”<sup>96</sup> The “new beginning” of which he spoke was both the successful passage of \$140 billion in federal budget cuts (the final details of which were at that moment being resolve in a conference committee), and the prospective passage of the Economic Recovery and Tax Act of 1981 which featured across-the-board tax cuts by five percent in 1981, and ten percent in both 1982 and 1983. Strictly speaking, Reagan’s definition of the upcoming vote as a “new beginning” was a bit premature since the vote on the tax cut components of the bill was shaping up to be a close one—a political problem for Reagan that his speech would soon rectify.

Reagan explained that public response in favor of the proposed budget cuts had “reaffirmed the mandate you delivered in the election last November.”<sup>97</sup> Reagan explained that the battles with Congress had been so hard-fought because those who opposed the legislation were merely political insiders whose “way of life depend[ed] on maintaining government’s wasteful ways . . .” yet these loud protests were “no match for your voices, which were heard loud and clear in these marble halls of government.”<sup>98</sup> This statement illustrated Reagan’s unique rhetorical ability to combine an optimistic

outlook defining the American people as the source of all that was virtuous in the republic with a narrow, yet acerbic, declension aimed squarely at his political opposition. For instance, although he argued that the tax cut legislation before the Congress was a bipartisan reflection of the public desire to stop inflation and promote economic growth, he berated the Democratic leadership for, at first, calling such a proposal “wildly inflationary” then concluding in the face of public opinion that a tax cut one or two years in duration “might work.”<sup>99</sup> “Now” Reagan added, “it’s July and they find they could even go for a third year cut provided there was a trigger arrangement that would allow it to go into effect if certain economic goals had been met by 1983.”

Reagan argued that such dithering was tantamount to “holding the people’s tax reduction hostage to future economic events” which would deprive American farmers and shopkeepers of “the certainty they must have to begin saving or investing more of their money” which was “precisely what we need now to rebuild our economy.”<sup>100</sup> The declension continued as Reagan accused congressional Democrats of proposing a trigger mechanism of deficit reduction which they knew (an interesting admission from Reagan given his promise that this measure would ultimately help reduce the deficit) would never be met. In short, Reagan charged that the Democrats were proposing a type of Will Rogers (who “never met a man he didn’t like”) approach to tax policy: “I’m afraid we have some people around here who never met a tax they didn’t hike.”<sup>101</sup>

As prescribed by the jeremiad form, Reagan returned to his familiar argument that the people, not the federal government, had a right to their money and that the tax reductions he proposed would reestablish this seemingly-forgotten provision of the national covenant. Accordingly, the public had a clear choice before it:

In a few days the Congress will stand at the fork of two roads. One road is all too familiar to us. It leads ultimately to higher taxes. It merely brings us back to the source of our economic problems, where the government decides that it knows better than you what should be done with your earnings and, in fact, how you should conduct your life. The other road promises to renew the American spirit. It's a road of hope and opportunity. It places the direction of your life back in your hands where it belongs.<sup>102</sup>

Yet in Reagan's jeremiad the decision of which road to follow was ultimately up to the people rather than Congress. Throughout his first six months in office Reagan's postmillennial economic jeremiad led up to this moment wherein he laid before the public a clear choice of which road to follow. His rhetoric suggested that he could only prescribe what he believed to be the appropriate path, the choice lay with them. Reagan's political postmillennialism enabled him to include a prediction of future glory in his direct appeal for public action on behalf of the ERTA:

In these 6 months, we've done so much and have come so far. It's been the power of millions of people like you who have determined that we will make America great again. You have made the difference up to now. You will make the difference again. Let us not stop now.<sup>103</sup>

The public's response to Reagan's appeal was as powerful as it was rapid. Telephone calls, telegrams, and letters flooded the Capitol prompting Democratic Speaker of the House Thomas "Tip" O'Neill to observe that Reagan's address "had a devastating effect" on his political opposition.<sup>104</sup> Forty-eight House Democrats broke ranks and supported the administration's proposal despite the last minute political threats from Speaker O'Neill. As political scientist John W. Sloan reported, "What had appeared to be a close contest turned out to be a solid majority for the administration . . . ."<sup>105</sup>

It is important to see this public response for what it really was—not just a strong public reaction to one speech, but to a well-conceived rhetorical campaign beginning with gloomy prophecies in January and culminating in July with what Reagan claimed to

be the reclamation of public control of government. The foregoing analysis reveals that Reagan's economic discourse was a jeremiad yet it was far from a traditional jeremiad because it did not blame the public and it stressed progressively-optimistic predictions about the future. These optimistic features are the byproduct of the political postmillennial orientation of Reagan's discourse. The combination of the jeremiad form with these postmillennial themes resulted in an effective political shibboleth which enabled Reagan to rally the nation—and Congress by extension—to support the tax reduction legislation.

Ronald Reagan clearly won his rhetorical battle to enact legislation that provided the largest tax cut in American history. It eventually accounted for a loss of \$750 billion from the U.S. Treasury, the creation of numerous tax loopholes for businesses large and small, and federal spending cuts of approximately \$140 billion in 1982 alone.<sup>106</sup> Each of these objectives was largely-consistent with the conservative philosophy under which Reagan campaigned in 1980. Initially, it looked like Reagan's success in appealing to the public might also result in positive effects for the nation's economy. The ERTA performed largely as expected with regard to significantly slowing the growth of inflation. However, as the economy fell into a deep recession lasting from the fall of 1981 until the fall of 1982 and the total national debt exploded to well beyond \$1 trillion dollars fueled by the ever-expanding federal budget deficits<sup>107</sup> it seemed to some that the Reagan administration had duped the public into accepting a highly-suspect economic program. Reagan's budget director David Stockman reinforced this perception when he was quoted in the December 1981 *Atlantic* magazine as saying "none of us really

understands what's going on with all these numbers" in the budget for which Reagan had fought so fiercely.<sup>108</sup>

Critics of Reagan's economic policy were given additional ammunition when he approved congressionally-initiated tax increases in 1982, 1983 and 1984 which had the cumulative effect of recouping approximately one quarter of the lost revenues wrought by the ERTA.<sup>109</sup> My objective in this chapter is not to make an assessment of the success or failure of Reagan's economic policies, but to explore the degree to which Reagan's postmillennial jeremiad enabled him to promote them. To that end, it is essential to note that as Reagan neared the end of his first term a fair amount of contrary evidence regarding his economic policies had begun to surface. This historical fact provides an opportunity to gauge again the effectiveness of Reagan's economic jeremiad, particularly with regard to its postmillennial themes which tended to offer a glorious vision of the future. That vision dismissed contrary evidence and arguments as nothing more than the empty prattle of those seeking to delay the coming of the American millennium.

As his first term ended and his second began, Ronald Reagan began to assess the accomplishments of the economic recovery by returning to his familiar postmillennial jeremiad in his second inaugural address. Reagan's second inaugural has not been treated kindly by either academic authors or former Reagan insiders.<sup>110</sup> Despite these negative judgments of the address, it is significant to this chapter because Reagan concentrated more on broadly assessing the economic achievements of his first administration and using these achievements to argue enthymematically that the future would therefore be equally grand. He began by opining that he had first assumed the presidency at a time of "economic stress" when even the nation's leaders had begun to doubt that America's

brightest days lay ahead.<sup>111</sup> While Reagan continually expressed the idea that much work remained, the address suggested that an important corner had been turned. Continuing in the trajectory of the postmillennial jeremiad he gradually developed during his first term, he attributed the positive changes to the people rather than himself. This strategy was evidenced by copious uses of “we” throughout the address: “we knew it was time to renew our faith,” “We believed then and now . . .,” “We are creating a nation once again vibrant, robust and alive,” and “We will not rest until every American enjoys the fullness of freedom . . . .”<sup>112</sup>

These successes had occurred, he argued, because the nation had rediscovered the freedom-loving, individualistic entrepreneurial spirit that was at its core. The economic reforms he had proposed and that the people had so whole-heartedly endorsed through their public support of the tax reduction legislation in 1981 reflected the public’s return to the national covenant. “At the heart of our efforts” he explained “is one idea vindicated by 25 straight months of economic growth: Freedom and incentives unleash the drive and entrepreneurial genius that are the core of human progress.”<sup>113</sup> Although Reagan’s economic success in curtailing the crippling stagflation of the 1970s was already apparent by January of 1985, Reagan neglected to mention that the means by which this major goal had been attained were not nearly as rhetorically neat or ideologically tidy as his description suggested. As Sloan notes, Reagan’s success in fighting off inflation worked “partly by design, partly by compromise, partly by muddling through . . . .”<sup>114</sup> Reagan’s support of “revenue enhancements” in 1982, 1983, and 1984 certainly provide support for the notion that Reagan’s original economic reforms most clearly represented in the ERTA were certainly not the only factors responsible for the American economic renewal.



Additionally, the address seemed to be rhetorically hobbled by what Ritter describes as its “uncertainty over whether national redemption had been accomplished.”<sup>115</sup>

Although it was certainly not Reagan’s most effective speech, his second inaugural continued Reagan’s postmillennial jeremiad by prophesying that his economic reforms had once again enabled the nation to have its “economy leading the world to a new age of economic expansion, we look to a future rich in possibilities.”<sup>116</sup> In short, the agents of the coming American millennium were doing the gradual work necessary to usher in this golden era of American prosperity.

As Reagan’s second term neared its end, the time had come to sum up the achievements of his administration. Reagan delivered several major speeches in his final months designed to highlight his achievements in areas such as domestic policy and foreign affairs. Two of Reagan’s farewells are particularly relevant as assessments of his economic recovery policies despite the fact that neither of them were confined to that topic alone. Because Reagan’s rhetorical presidency had begun with such heavy emphasis upon the nation’s economic perils, it was only appropriate that the economy would be a major subject in both the farewell address to the Republican Party at its national convention on August 15, 1988 and his farewell address to the nation on January 11, 1989.

As would be expected, the assembled delegates to the 1988 Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, gave the president a rousing welcome on that evening. Reagan began the address in a rather self-congratulatory manner by suggesting that they all deserved “a little pat on the back” for having restored the Nixon-riddled ethos of the Republican Party, but most of all for making “America a proud nation

again.”<sup>117</sup> Like the skilled narrator he was, Reagan invited the delegates to recall their 1980 convention in Detroit, Michigan, where “it was our dream that together we could rescue America and make a new beginning, to create anew that shining city on a hill.”<sup>118</sup> The shining city was in need of rescue then because of the growth of what Reagan called “Trust Me Government,” which had created the “economic chaos” that his reforms had since transformed into an era of “economic promise.”<sup>119</sup> As always, Reagan gave credit to the American people who, in his words, “endured the great challenge of lifting us from the depths of national calamity, renewing our mighty economic strength . . .”<sup>120</sup> Despite the fact that Reagan consistently identified the American people as the real heroes behind his political and economic accomplishments, the partisan exigence of this speech created some degree of inconsistency. Why pat themselves as Republicans on the back if, as Reagan so often claimed, it was the American people who had restored the nation?

By far, the most interesting element of Reagan’s postmillennial jeremiad present in this speech was his use of a narrow, but sometimes rather harsh, declension to describe the Democrats. One certainly expects to hear expostulations of the political opposition when listening to such an address. Yet, some of Reagan’s denunciations of the Democrats ultimately lose credibility with a universal audience because they appear grounded in his own self-interest, and framed in what rhetorical analyst Robert Hariman describes as the “realist style.”<sup>121</sup> “Successful speakers in the realist style . . .” explains Hariman “keep public debate on their own limited terms . . .”<sup>122</sup> At one point, for example, Reagan cited increasing factory capacity, new home and car sales and the halting of inflation as evidence of the improved economy and then glibly remarked: “You know, I’ve noticed they don’t call it Reaganomics anymore.”<sup>123</sup> Two interpretive problems existed with

Reagan's interpretation. First, the term Reaganomics was (and is) still routinely applied to his economic philosophy. Second, his description implies an absence of economic problems as a result of his program—an implication belied by the tremendous budget deficit and the need for “revenue enhancements” after his initial tax cuts.

Other credibility problems emerged from an attack where Reagan blatantly lied. While decrying the nation's soaring budget deficits throughout the 1980s, Reagan was content to blame Congress entirely: “But the President doesn't vote for a budget, and the President can't spend a dime. Only the Congress can do that.”<sup>124</sup> In fact, Reagan never once submitted a balanced budget to the Congress, yet his use of the postmillennial jeremiad enabled him to simply (but convincingly) sweep away such inconvenient contrary evidence.

These credibility problems aside, Reagan was able to employ his narrow declensions in a manner consistent with his political postmillennial themes. The following is representative of the strategy:

And virtually all this change occurred—and continues to occur—in spite of the resistance of those liberal elites who loudly proclaim that it's time for a change. They resisted our defense buildup. They resisted our tax cuts. They resisted cutting the fat out of government. And they resisted our appointments of judges committed to the law and Constitution.<sup>125</sup>

In the context of his jeremiad, Reagan's anaphora listing all of the things “they resisted” paints a vivid picture of a powerful elite on the fringe of the American promise actively working to prevent the realization of the American millennium. To Reagan however, the promise of America was still alive and well despite the best efforts of these detractors who had broken faith with the American vision. Reagan explained his view of American promise in this way:

I know I've said this before, but I believe that God put this land between the two great oceans to be found by special people from every corner of the world who had that extra love for freedom that prompted them to leave their homeland and come to this land to make it a brilliant light beam of freedom to the world. It's our gift to have visions, and I want to share that of a young boy who wrote to me shortly after I took office. In his letter he said, 'I love America because you can join Cub Scouts if you want to. You have a right to worship as you please. . . . And I also like America because we have about 200 flavors of ice cream.' Well, truth through the eyes of a child: freedom of association, freedom of worship, freedom of hope and opportunity, and the pursuit of happiness—in this case, choosing among 200 flavors of ice cream—that's America, everyone with his or her vision of the American promise.<sup>126</sup>

The inspiration for the saccharine-sweet vision came from a young boy, whom Reagan suggested was representative of the American character. The proofs of the boy's argument (and Reagan's) about the American promise—Cub Scouts, freedom of religious practice, and ice cream—are represented collectively as the embodiment of the American ideal. Indeed, immediately after this anecdote Reagan explained that this vision is why some “dodged bullets” to get across the Berlin Wall and why others braved death by “coming in tiny boats on turbulent oceans.”<sup>127</sup> Although he was quite careful not to suggest that America has arrived at moral, spiritual, or political perfection, his thesis was unmistakable: Americans would continue their work to gradually achieve even greater perfection and to defend the progress that had been made under his watch. As Reagan said near the end of the address: “Our freedom must be defended over and over again—and then again.”<sup>128</sup>

Aside from tendering his farewell to the American public, Ronald Reagan's final major televised presidential address on January 11, 1989 also sought to present his economic vision in its full glory. In light of Reagan's gift for storytelling and the hopeful writing style of Peggy Noonan who was Reagan's primary writer for the speech, it is not

surprising that this address was—despite its long warning about cultural declension near the end—the most economically-optimistic of all his addresses. While careful not to say that everything was perfect, Reagan’s metaphor of the long economic and cultural journey the nation had completed under his leadership belied this caution. “It’s been quite a long journey this decade” he opined “and we held together through some stormy seas. And at the end, together, we are reaching our destination.”<sup>129</sup> As Reagan told it, “there were two great triumphs” achieved during his administration “One is the economic recovery, in which the people of America created—and filled—19 million new jobs. The other is the recovery of our morale. America is respected again and looked to for leadership.”<sup>130</sup> Again, the credit for the recovery ultimately went to the American public. Nevertheless, this did not prevent Reagan from both taking some shots at the critics of his economic proposals.

Well, back in 1980, when I was running for President, it was all so different. Some pundits said our programs would result in catastrophe. Our views on foreign affairs would cause war. Our plans for the economy would cause inflation to soar and bring about economic collapse. I even remember one highly respected economist saying back in 1982, that ‘The engines of economic growth have shut down here, and they’re likely to stay that way for years to come.’ Well, he and the other opinion leaders were wrong. The fact is, what they called ‘radical’ was really ‘right.’ What they called ‘dangerous’ was just ‘desperately needed.’<sup>131</sup>

As rhetorical analysts Amos Kiewe and Davis Houck write of the address, “The eight years were described by Reagan in a legend-like manner with the hero overcoming many obstacles, . . . Reagan fashioned himself as the hero of his romanticized vision of America, he was the hero of the Shining City.”<sup>132</sup>

Reagan’s implicit discussion of himself as the hero of America’s renewal appears at first glance to violate the dictates of his political postmillennialism which assiduously

attributed victory to the people two important considerations unique to his farewell address must be acknowledged. First, it must be recalled that presidential farewells as far back as George Washington's famous open letter to the public in 1796 engender a sort of intimacy unique to the American presidency. Among other things, presidents must express gratitude to the public for what Washington called the "steadfast confidence with which it has supported me."<sup>133</sup> This epideictic task can only be accomplished by some discussion of the national accomplishments brought about by the nation's trust in the person holding the office. Second, the Reagan-as-hero motif of this address seems largely to have been inspired by speechwriter Peggy Noonan who wrote Reagan's farewell. In a memorandum she sent to Reagan during the drafting process Noonan counseled the president to remember that the public wanted to say goodbye to him personally through this speech because "make no mistake about it, the American people are being 'left' by the first President they could manage to love since John Kennedy a quarter century ago. They love you, Mr. President, but you're still a mystery man to them in some respects."<sup>134</sup> Thus, the intimate character of farewell addresses and the urging of his speechwriter nudged Reagan in the direction of appearing to portray himself as a hero who got into politics to "protect something precious"<sup>135</sup> because it was simply part of Reagan's personal political story.

Reagan's political postmillennialism reached its zenith in the farewell address. His part of the journey as the nation's chief executive was over, yet he recognized that the nation must and would continue. Acknowledging that challenges would always remain on the national horizon, he explained that they could always be met because "as long as we remember our first principles and believe in ourselves, the future will always

be ours.”<sup>136</sup> To poetically drive home this point, Reagan closed the address with one of his signature metaphors. Since 1969, Reagan often spoke of America as a “shining city upon a hill.”<sup>137</sup> For Reagan, the shining city expressed the pinnacle of American potential. Throughout his career, he used it to both extol the virtues of America and chastise certain people or groups—warning them that only they could prevent the loss of the shining city.

However, in this address Reagan used the metaphor to not only sum up his view of the administration’s economic achievements, but to assess his own presidency.

The past few days when I’ve been at that window upstairs, I’ve thought a bit of the ‘shining city upon a hill.’ . . . I’ve spoken of the shining city all my political life, but I don’t know if I ever quite communicated what I saw when I said it. But in my mind it was a tall, proud city built on rocks stronger than oceans, windswept, God-blessed, and teeming with people of all kinds living in harmony and peace; a city with free ports that hummed with commerce and creativity. And if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here. That’s how I saw it, and see it still. And how stands the city on this winter night? More prosperous, more secure, and happier than it was 8 years ago. But more than that: After 200 years, two centuries, she still stands strong and true on the granite ridge, and her glow has held steady no matter what the storm. And she’s still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness toward home.<sup>138</sup>

Reagan’s image of a strong city upon a hill with abundant “commerce and creativity” certainly featured strong economic overtones. Yet one also detects strong religious overtones in the metaphor. For one thing, the phrase “city on a hill” originated not with John Winthrop as Reagan always claimed when he used it, but with Christ’s Sermon on the Mount found in Matthew 5:14-16. Additionally, the elements of Reagan’s secularized postmillennial jeremiad are abundantly clear in the metaphor. Not only was the shining city a vision of the realized American utopia, it was ultimately achieved by a noble and

dedicated people who had to brave the storms and fight to realize this vision in the face of intense opposition.

As with other instances of Reagan's postmillennial jeremiad, this address had the propensity to overlook relevant contrary facts. As noted earlier, not all of the American economic recovery could be interpreted as having resulted from the tax and budget cuts imposed by the 1981 ERTA. While this legislation was mostly consistent with Reagan's ideology, Reagan ultimately had to go along with tax raises in 1982, 1983, and 1984 in order to prevent the almost certain economic calamity which would have resulted from federal budget deficits even larger than the ones of the 1980s. Such details simply had no place in Reagan's story of national renewal.

### **The Reagan Economic Jeremiad as Political Shibboleth**

The analyses offered in this chapter and the preceding one demonstrate that the American jeremiad is a multi-faceted, ubiquitous, highly-adaptable, religious rhetorical form which can be either a tremendous rhetorical resource or a rhetorical quagmire for contemporary presidents. In Reagan's case, his penchant for highlighting the promise and prophecy dimensions of the jeremiad while narrowing the declension so as to target only specific people or groups he claimed to be obstructing the nation's millennial progress was generally received with enthusiasm by the general public. Although he faced the same peaks and valleys of public opinion common to any American president, Reagan finished his term with a public approval rating of sixty-three percent—a mark significantly higher than any of the seven presidents who preceded him.<sup>139</sup>

A host of factors could certainly be discussed as having contributed to his popularity at the end of his presidential tenure; yet Kurt Ritter and David Henry seem to



define the essence of Reagan's rhetorical success when they write that his rhetorical mastery was a matter of "his drive for oratorical perfection, his television delivery skills, and his ability to express a vision of America that was grounded in American civil religion."<sup>140</sup> While Ritter and Henry's explanation of Reagan's appeals to civil religion is plagued by the conceptual problems with the concept as noted in chapter II, the essence of their argument is that Reagan used the available rhetorical resources such as the jeremiad form and his own political postmillennialism to create economic rhetoric quite attuned to the mythical desires of the masses. Naturally, it is Reagan's description of American vision which is seen most clearly in the economic jeremiads explored in this chapter. As the foregoing analysis has demonstrated, Reagan's economic rhetoric rhetorically linked passage of his conservative economic agenda to his idyllic American vision in the same way that theological postmillennialists argue that the kingdom of God is achievable by humans, by degrees, via the enactment of a social agenda of education and intellectual and spiritual enlightenment. As shown throughout this chapter, the resemblance is more than incidental. It was Reagan's adaptation of a religious rhetorical form which, throughout American history, had been known largely for its harsh condemnation of the community. However, in Reagan's estimation, the community was not to blame for the nation's troubles. It was, rather, the failure of the previous administration to instill confidence in the public, the opposition of Democratic congressional leaders to his economic proposals, and the voices of professional economists and "liberal elites" who endangered America.

Given these factors, it is not difficult to see why Reagan's postmillennial economic jeremiad was largely effective as a political shibboleth. Not only did it attribute

the success of America's economic recovery to the people, it also provided a series of convenient scapegoats for the public to blame when things went wrong. However, these were not the only reasons why Reagan's postmillennial economic jeremiad was an effective shibboleth. Simply stated, Reagan's jeremiad was an effective shibboleth because it not only gave the public the prospect of a hopeful future, it told them that they were a special—exceptional—people. And, as Reagan indicated in his first inaugural address, all they had to do to recapture that seemingly lost greatness was to simply believe in it again. Thus, while the successes and failures of Reagan's economic policies will (and should) continue to be debated by scholars from a wide array of disciplines, there can be little doubt that his postmillennial economic jeremiad made them feel good about themselves again.

### Notes

1. Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Income Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981." *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan-1981*. (United States Government Printing Office: 1982), 668.
2. Historian David Howard-Pitney argues that the jeremiad consists of three basic components—the promise, the declension, and the prophecy. In the promise, the minister reminds the congregation that they are a blessed, peculiar people who stand in a state of covenant with the Almighty. The declension warns the people that they have strayed from the mandates of their covenant and are in peril as a result of these sins. This step often involves enumeration of the sins for which the minister seeks to chastise the flock. In the promise, the people are challenged to amend their errant ways and reform thereby restoring the covenant. This step of the jeremiad often includes an optimistic prediction that the covenant community will do just that. See David Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2005), 7.
3. Official Candidacy Announcement, Ronald Reagan, November 13, 1979, folder "1981 Inaugural," Box 1, Kenneth L. Khachigian Papers, Ronald Reagan Library. (Hereafter cited as "Reagan Candidacy Announcement.")
4. "Reagan Candidacy Announcement."
5. "Reagan Candidacy Announcement."
6. Reagan made use of this metaphor throughout his political life from 1969 until the end of his presidency in 1989. See Kurt Ritter and David Henry, *Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 119. Although Reagan always attributed the metaphor to John Winthrop, it should be noted that Winthrop's metaphor was taken from Christ's Sermon on the Mount: "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but

on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven." See Matthew 5: 14-16, Revised Standard Version.

7. "Reagan Candidacy Announcement."

8. A number of studies have acknowledged the jeremiadic rhetoric of the Reagan presidency. See Richard L. Johannesen, "Ronald Reagan's Economic Jeremiad," *Central States Speech Journal* 37 (1986): 79-89; Kurt W. Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition: Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses, 1960-1976," *Central States Speech Journal* 31 (1980): 153-171.

9. For studies representative of this approach see G. Thomas Goodnight, "Ronald Reagan and the American Dream: A Study in Rhetoric Out of Time," in *The Presidency and Rhetorical Leadership* ed. Leroy G. Dorsey (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 200-230; Craig Allen Smith, "Mister Reagan's Neighborhood: Rhetoric and National Unity," *Southern Communication Journal* 52 (1987): 219-239.

10. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1953), 33.

11. Samuel Danforth, "A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness," in *American Rhetorical Discourse* ed. Ronald F. Reid and James F. Klumpp (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2005), 39.

12. Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 3; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), 415.

13. Miller explains the basic character of Puritan theology in relation to the tertiary world as follows: "There is implicit recognition of a causal sequence: the sins exist, the disease breaks out; the sins are reformed, the disease is cured." Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 27. Emory Elliott also provides an enlightening discussion of how the Puritan theology which emanated from their rhetorical culture had a profound influence upon their daily lives. See Emory Elliott, *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 88-135.

14. The Massachusetts Synod produced a document called "The Result" which listed these and numerous other offenses deemed unsuitable for God's covenant people in the New World. See Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 33-36.

15. For a helpful survey of these various subgenres of Puritan sermons see Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 23-31. Ellis Sandoz compiles an impressive anthology of late colonial era artillery day, election day, and fast day sermons in his two-volume work *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (Indianapolis, ID: Liberty Fund, 1998).

16. Several authors have noted the influence and prevalence of colonial era jeremiads. See Stephen H. Browne, "Samuel Danforth's Errand into the Wilderness and the Discourse of Arrival in Early American Culture," *Communication Quarterly* 40 (1992): 91-101; Charles J.G. Griffin, "Sins of the Fathers: The Jeremiad and the Franco-American Crisis in the Fast Day Sermons of 1798," *The Southern Speech Communication Journal* 47 (1982): 389-401; Kurt W. Ritter and James R. Andrews, *The American Ideology: Reflections of the Revolution in American Rhetoric* (Annandale: Speech Communication Association, 1978), 15-19.

17. Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, 33.

18. Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad*, 9. See also Stout, *The New England Soul*, 80.

19. Sacvan Bercovitch, "Horologicals to Chronometricals: The Rhetoric of the Jeremiad," in *Literary Monographs vol. 3* ed. Eric Rothstein (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970), 27.
20. Bercovitch, "Horologicals to Chronometricals," 13-14.
21. See Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 137-186.
22. See footnote # 43 in chapter III.
23. Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad*, 15.
24. Howard-Pitney, *The African American Jeremiad*, 215.
25. Recent communication studies have begun to acknowledge that jeremiads can be conservative in the sense that they reinforce positive visions of the nation. See John M. Murphy, "'A Time of Shame and Sorrow': Robert F. Kennedy and the American Jeremiad," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990) 401-414; A. Susan Owen, "Memory, War and American Identity: *Saving Private Ryan* as Cinematic Jeremiad," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 19 (2002): 249-282; Daniel O. Buehler, "Permanence and Change in Theodore Roosevelt's Conservation Jeremiad," *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (1998): 439-458. The jeremiad form has also been useful to President George W. Bush in his response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. See Denise M. Bostdorff, "George W. Bush's Post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 293-319; John M. Murphy, "'Our Mission and Our Moment': George W. Bush and September 11<sup>th</sup>," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003): 607-632.
26. See Amos Kiewe and Davis W. Houck, *A Shining City on a Hill: Ronald Reagan's Economic Rhetoric, 1951-1989* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1991).
27. Johannesen, "Ronald Reagan's Economic Jeremiad," 87.
28. See Isaiah 11: 6-12, Revised Standard Version: "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as an ensign to the peoples; him shall the nations seek, and his dwellings shall be glorious. In that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant which is left of his people, from Assyria, from Egypt, from Pathros, from Ethiopia, from Elam, from Shinar, from Hamath, and from the coastlands of the sea. He will raise an ensign for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel, and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth." See also Micah 4: 1-4, Revised Standard Version: "It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the LORD shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised up above the hills; and peoples shall flow to it, and many nations shall come, and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and we may walk in his paths.' For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations afar off; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more; but they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the LORD of hosts has spoken."
29. Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 15.
30. Millard J. Erickson, *A Basic Guide to Eschatology: Making Sense of the Millennium* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 94. See also Susan Harding, "Imagining the Last Days: The Politics of Apocalyptic

Language,” in *Accounting for Fundamentalisms: The Dynamic Character of Movements* ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 57-78.

31. See Harding, “Imagining the Last Days,” 60-67; Crawford Gribben, “After *Left Behind*—The Paradox of Evangelical Pessimism,” in *Expecting the End: Millennialism in Social and Historical Context* ed. Kenneth G.C. Newport and Crawford Gribben (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 113-130; Jonathon Scott Feit, “Sacred Symbols and the Depiction of Religions in Millennial Movies (1997-2002),” *Journal of Media and Religion* 3 (2004): 133-150.

32. Some have posited that the rise of premillennial teaching in evangelical congregations during this period was precipitated by a great deal of discomfort with the advances of science, literary criticism of the Bible, and the budding progressive movement which many evangelicals saw as threats to the faith. The premillennial doctrine would presumably supply a degree of certainty in an increasingly uncertain modern world. See Karen Armstrong, *The Battle for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), 137-144.

33. Emmanuel Sivan, “The Enclave Culture,” in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* ed. Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 39.

34. Harding, “Imagining the Last Days,” 57.

35. Harding, “Imagining the Last Days,” 57; Armstrong, *The Battle for God*, 138.

36. Jean B. Quandt, “Religion and Social Thought: The Secularization of Postmillennialism,” *American Quarterly* 25 (1973), 391.

37. These cases all illustrate the degree to which the postmillennial vision contributed to social reform in late nineteenth and early twentieth century America. As Jean B. Quandt, James H. Moorhead, and Rhys Williams and Susan Alexander all acknowledge, postmillennialism contributed mightily to the persuasive force of reform arguments whether delivered by religious rhetors or not. See Quandt, “Religion and Social Thought,” 390-409; James H. Moorhead, “Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800-1880,” *The Journal of American History* 71 (1984): 524-542; James H. Moorhead, “Social Reform and the Divided Conscience of Antebellum Protestantism,” *Church History* 48 (1979): 416-430; Rhys H. Williams and Susan Alexander, “Religious Rhetoric in American Populism: Civil Religion as Movement Ideology,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (1994): 1-15.

38. Harding, “Imagining the Last Days,” 67-71. See also Clyde Wilcox, *Onward Christian Soldiers?: The Religious Right in American Politics 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000), 35-41.

39. See Kurt Ritter, “Reagan’s 1964 TV Speech for Goldwater: Millennial Themes in American Political Rhetoric,” in *Rhetorical Dimensions in Media: A Critical Casebook 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* ed. Martin J. Medhurst and Thomas W. Benson (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1991), 58-72.

40. Ritter, “Reagan’s 1964 TV Speech for Goldwater,” 68.

41. Ronald Reagan, “A Time for Choosing, October 27, 1964,” <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/ronaldreaganatimeforchoosing.htm> (accessed June 20, 2007).

42. Stephen D. O’Leary offers a different view of Reagan’s rhetoric. He argues that Reagan’s rhetoric “rejected any political program founded in the sort of perfectionism that inspired some postmillennial movements of the nineteenth century.” Stephen D. O’Leary, *Arguing the Apocalypse: A Theory of Millennial Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 181. Strictly speaking, O’Leary is correct, but our differing interpretations stem from the fact that O’Leary’s claim is based upon his analysis of Reagan’s pre-presidential rhetoric wherein he expressed grave doubts about the survival of American democracy as he did in his “A Time For Choosing” speech. I, on the other hand, am examining Reagan’s presidential economic rhetoric which moved along an entirely different rhetorical trajectory.

43. "Reagan 'Putting his Heart' into the Inaugural Address," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, January 11, 1981, A6. Additional evidence of this claim is found by examining Reagan's hand-written notes of virtually the entire speech. Copies of these pages can be found in the archives of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library in Simi Valley, CA. Draft of Inaugural Address, Ronald Reagan, Undated, folder "1981 Inaugural," Box 1, Kenneth L. Khachigian Papers, Ronald Reagan Library.
44. Such photos appeared in "Reagan 'Putting his Heart'," A6. and "Reagan Polishes his Inaugural Address," *San Diego Union--Tribune*, January 11, 1981, A4.
45. See James Darsey, "The Legend of Eugene Debs: Prophetic Ethos as Radical Argument," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74 (1988): 434-452; Margaret D. Zulick, "The Agon of Jeremiah: On the Dialogic Invention of Prophetic Ethos," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 125-148.
46. "Reagan Polishes his Inaugural Address," A4.
47. Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan, 1981*, (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1982), 1.
48. Ken Khachigian, First Draft of Inaugural Address of President Ronald Reagan, January 4, 1981, "1981 Inaugural" Box 1, Kenneth L. Khachigian Papers, Ronald Reagan Library.
49. Khachigian, "First Draft of Inaugural Address of President Ronald Reagan,"
50. Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981," 2.
51. Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981," 4.
52. Bruce E. Gronbeck, "Ronald Reagan's Enactment of the Presidency in his 1981 Inaugural Address," in *Form, Genre, and the Study of Political Discourse* ed. Herbert W. Simons and Aram A. Aghazarian (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1986), 237.
53. Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981," 4.
54. Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981," 2.
55. Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981," 2.
56. Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1981," 2.
57. Smith, "Mister Reagan's Neighborhood: Rhetoric and National Unity," 225.
58. Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan-1981* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington: 1982), 79.
59. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 79.
60. Memo, Ray Price to the President-Elect, "Inaugural Address," December 11, 1980, folder "1981 Inaugural," Box 1, Kenneth L. Khachigian Papers, Ronald Reagan Library. (Hereafter cited as Price, "Memo to President-Elect.")
61. Price, "Memo to President-Elect."
62. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 80.

63. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 80.
64. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 80.
65. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 80.
66. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 81.
67. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 81.
68. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 82.
69. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 81.
70. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 83.
71. Ritter and Henry, *Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator*, 52.
72. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on the Economy, February 5, 1981," 83.
73. Anderson reprinted the memorandum in its entirety. See Martin Anderson, *Revolution* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 114-121.
74. Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, February 18, 1981." *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan-1981* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington: 1982), 109.
75. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the National Conference of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, March 30, 1981," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan-1981* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington: 1982), 307.
76. Reagan, "Remarks at the National Conference of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, March 30, 1981," 307.
77. Reagan, "Remarks at the National Conference of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, March 30, 1981," 310.
78. Reagan, "Remarks at the National Conference of the Building and Construction Trades Department, AFL-CIO, March 30, 1981," 310.
79. A number of biographers have intimated that Hinckley's failed attempt on Reagan's life convinced him that he had been providentially spared. Paul Kengor writes that Reagan told family members and some religious leaders with whom he met during and after his recovery that "whatever time I have left is for Him." Kengor also suggests that this instilled in Reagan a sense of mission which enabled him to attack Soviet communism with greater alacrity. See Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Regan Books, 2004), 197-216. For similar parallels from a non-scholarly writer see Mary Beth Brown, *Hand of Providence: The Strong and Quiet Faith of Ronald Reagan* (Nashville: WND Books, 2004), 3-16.
80. Ronald Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan-1981* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington: 1982), 391.
81. Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 391.

82. Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 391.

83. Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 391-392.

84. I use the term "enact" here in the same way Campbell and Jamieson use it to describe the July 12, 1976 Democratic convention keynote address of Congresswoman Barbara Jordan (D-Texas). Campbell and Jamieson argue that Jordan's very presence and standing as the convention's keynote speaker was the embodiment of the very themes of racial and gender equality she conveyed in the speech. Campbell and Jamieson describe this rhetorical scenario as a rhetorical form known as enactment wherein "the speaker incarnates the argument, is the proof of the truth of what is said. . . ." and in fact "embodies the position she is arguing." Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction," in *Form and Genre: Shaping Rhetorical Action* ed. Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson (Falls Church: Speech Communication Association, 1978), 9-10. In similar fashion, Reagan's act of standing before the country to deliver a major address less than a month after John Hinckley's bullet and the subsequent complications he developed nearly killed him. Reagan himself drew this parallel between his own health and the economy when he said "Thanks to some very fine people, my health is much improved. I'd like to be able to say that with regard to the health of the economy."

85. Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 392.

86. Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 392.

87. Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 392.

88. Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 392.

89. Congressman Jim Jones (D-OK) was the driving force behind the House Budget Committee's counter-proposal. This version of the legislation promised about the same level of budget cuts, a more modest increase in the defense budget, and promised to create a balanced budget in 1983, a full year sooner than the Gramm-Latta bill Reagan favored. See John W. Sloan, *The Reagan Effect: Economics and Presidential Leadership* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 131.

90. Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 392.

91. Quoted by Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 394.

92. Reagan, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery, April 28, 1981," 394.

93. Sloan, *The Reagan Effect*, 142.

94. Kiewe and Houck, *A Shining City on a Hill*, 145.

95. Ronald Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan-1981* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington, DC: 1982), 664.

96. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981," 664.



97. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981," 664.
98. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981," 664.
99. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981," 666.
100. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981," 666.
101. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981," 666.
102. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981," 668.
103. Reagan, "Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981," 668.
104. Quoted in Sloan, *The Reagan Effect*, 145. See also Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997), 150-151.
105. Sloan, *The Reagan Effect*, 145.
106. Sloan, *The Reagan Effect*, 145-146. See also Michael Schaller, *Reckoning with Reagan: American and its President in the 1980s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 44-47.
107. Sloan, *The Reagan Effect*, 149.
108. William Greider, "The Education of David Stockman," *Atlantic* (December 1981) 32-43. See also Lou Canon, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 261; Kernell, *Going Public*, 152; Sloan, *The Reagan Effect*, 150.
109. In my judgment, the fairest and most thorough assessment of Reagan's economic policy I know of is provided by John W. Sloan. See John W. Sloan, "The Economic Costs of Reagan Mythology," In *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America's Fortieth President* (Armonk: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 41-69.
110. Kurt Ritter argues that Reagan's second inaugural "seemed destined for obscurity" from the beginning. Citing a number of deficiencies including a loss of the spectacular scenery of the West Front of the Capitol building Reagan had used in his 1981 inaugural, Ritter concludes that the address's most significant failure was that "it failed to set forth clearly the principles from which Reagan's second administration would draw its policies." Ritter also notes that former Reagan speechwriter Landon Parvin judged the speech harshly as well saying: "I didn't think [it] was very good." See Kurt Ritter, "President Reagan's Second Inaugural Address, 1985," in *The Inaugural Addresses of Twentieth-Century American Presidents* ed. Halford Ryan (Westport: Praeger, 1993), 271-281.
111. Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985." *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1985 Book I* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington: 1988), 55.
112. Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985," 55.
113. Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985," 56.
114. Sloan, "The Economic Costs of Reagan Mythology," 42.
115. Ritter, "President Reagan's Second Inaugural Address, 1985," 273.
116. Reagan, "Inaugural Address, January 21, 1985," 58.

117. Ronald Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988." *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan-1988-89 Book II* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington: 1991), 1080.
118. Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988," 1081.
119. Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988," 1081.
120. Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988," 1080.
121. See Robert Hariman, *Political Style: The Artistry of Power* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 13-49.
122. Hariman, *Political Style*, 44.
123. Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988," 1082.
124. Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988," 1082.
125. Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988," 1082.
126. Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988," 1085.
127. Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988," 1085.
128. Reagan, "Remarks at the Republican National Convention in New Orleans, Louisiana, August 15, 1988," 1085.
129. Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan: 1988-89 Book II* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington: 1991), 1719.
130. Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989," 1719.
131. Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989," 1720.
132. Kiewe and Houck, *A Shining City on a Hill*, 217.
133. George Washington, "Farewell Address, September 19, 1796," <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/historicspeeches/washington/farewell.html> (accessed June 10, 2007).
134. Letter, Peggy Noonan to Ronald Reagan, undated, ID#589277, SP1314, WHORM: Subject File, Ronald Reagan Library.
135. Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989," 1720.

136. Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989," 1720.
137. Ritter and Henry, *Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator*, 119.
138. Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation, January 11, 1989," 1722.
139. See Gary King and Lyn Ragsdale, *The Elusive Executive: Discovering Statistical Patterns in the Presidency* (Washington: CQ Press, 1988), 294.
140. Ritter and Henry, *Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator*, 115.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **“KICKING THE VIETNAM SYNDROME”: GEORGE H.W. BUSH, INCOMPLETE NATIONAL REDEMPTION, AND OPERATION DESERT STORM**

Now I have a special word for those who served in Vietnam. . . . your Nation, when that war ended, never appropriately said thanks. Then 20 years later, America was called to fight again, and this time we did what was needed to win. We fought quickly; we fought with purpose. And when the Desert Storm troops came home, a wondrous thing happened. America saluted, unanimously saluted, not just those heroes but our forgotten heroes, the men and women who served in Vietnam. The tribute was genuine. It was heartfelt, and it came from every corner of this Nation. And so, let me say this: It was long overdue. God bless those of you who served in that troubled war.

George H.W. Bush<sup>1</sup>

On August 2, 1990, 140,000 troops from the Iraqi army invaded Kuwait at the behest of Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Later that day President George Herbert Walker Bush publicly condemned the invasion as an unconscionable act of “naked aggression”<sup>2</sup> and initiated an impressive campaign of international diplomacy that would eventually culminate five months later when Operation Desert Storm began on January 16, 1991. Throughout the build up to the war Bush spoke of the conflict in the stark good versus evil themes so common in presidential war discourse.<sup>3</sup> Bush argued that Hussein’s “brutal assault” of his tiny oil-rich neighbor had disrupted the balance of peace throughout the world, but that Hussein now stood alone against “a world united.”<sup>4</sup>

The evil of Hussein’s reckless land grab was framed with religious language: “the world prayed for peace, Saddam prepared for war.”<sup>5</sup> From a rhetorical point of view, little in Bush’s address to the nation on January 16, 1991 was particularly surprising. Like every other president who has addressed the nation in a time of war Bush proclaimed the

justness of the cause behind the military endeavor, noted that war was the only remaining recourse for the realization of the international community's peaceful objectives, heralded the bravery of America's armed forces and confidently assured the nation that it would "not fail" to achieve victory.<sup>6</sup> Bush told the nation that "the battle has been joined,"<sup>7</sup> but then went out of his way to say that he had not yet ordered ground forces into combat. He also included the following caveat.

I've told the American people before that this will not be another Vietnam, and I repeat this here tonight. Our troops will have the best possible support in the entire world, and they will not be asked to fight with one hand tied behind their back. I'm hopeful that this fighting will not go on for long and that casualties will be held to an absolute minimum. . . . And let me say this to everyone listening or watching tonight: When the troops we've sent in finish their work, I am determined to bring them home as soon as possible.<sup>8</sup>

As Bush acknowledged, these pledges were restatements of a theme developed throughout the Bush administration's rhetorical march toward conflict in the Persian Gulf. The recurrence of this theme leads us to ask: Why would an American president feel compelled to tell the people that the conflict in which they were presently engaged would be entirely unlike a previous conflict that had ended nearly twenty years ago? The answer to this question, I posit, is that the American public continued to suffer from a collective sense of unresolved national guilt stemming from certain socio-political effects of its involvement in the Vietnam War. Accordingly, Bush not only needed to convince the public that the geopolitical factors which led the nation to war in the Persian Gulf were different from those of the Vietnam era; he also needed to enact national redemption and purge guilt from the public consciousness over the perceived national sins of the Vietnam War. Bush's strategic development and employment of this theme of national redemption as a political shibboleth is the focus of this chapter.

Many rhetorical analysts, historians, and contemporary journalists have observed that Bush's case for war to liberate Kuwait faced significant rhetorical and political constraints stemming from the pervasiveness of what many have called the "Vietnam syndrome."<sup>9</sup> As such, the observation that Bush had to discursively engage public anxieties about the prospect of a Vietnam-style quagmire in the Middle East is nothing new. In spite of the excellent extant scholarship about Bush's Persian Gulf War discourse, these studies do not recognize the influence of religious rhetorical form in this area of his presidential rhetorical corpus. In this chapter I offer an alternative reading of Bush's war discourse that reveals a largely successful, but ultimately incomplete, effort to rhetorically enact national atonement for the social and political sins of the Vietnam era.

This scholarly endeavor may appear strange to those familiar with the rhetoric of America's forty-first president for two reasons. First, George H.W. Bush was notoriously neglectful of presidential rhetoric as an important means of governance. Indeed, a recent book exploring Bush's rhetorical presidency reads as a veritable catalogue of missed opportunities for rhetorical leadership in everything from foreign affairs to education to his respective campaigns to win and hold the presidential office.<sup>10</sup> Bush's general dismissal of rhetoric as an important element of his presidency caused him to miss many of those leadership opportunities available to those who are able to create and maintain a compelling rhetorical persona. However, Bush's inability or unwillingness to fully cultivate the resources of the rhetorical presidency hardly means that his rhetoric lacked influence at any point in his presidency.

In four studies quite germane to the present chapter Kathryn Olson, Kathleen German, Mary Stuckey, and Carol Winkler each illustrate the effectiveness of Bush's

Persian Gulf War discourse. Olson writes that Bush used a variety of techniques including statements of support for the war's aims from U.S. troops, a fortiori arguments, and claims of minimal costs of the war ahead in order to stifle public debate and dissent.<sup>11</sup> Stuckey and German each trenchantly observe Bush's strategic use of discourse and metaphors from World War II and Vietnam in a manner which presented the Persian Gulf War as an analog of the former and a conflict entirely dissimilar from the latter.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Carol Winkler finds that Bush's strategy of "denouncing the Iraqi leader as a terrorist" enabled him to elevate the Gulf War "from a conventional war scenario between two foreign nation-states into an international battle against the scourge of terrorism."<sup>13</sup> Taken together, these studies indicate that although Bush was often reluctant to use the full rhetorical powers of his office, it would be a mistake to conclude that the rhetorical efforts he made in conjunction with the Persian Gulf War and American foreign policy always lacked significance or potency.<sup>14</sup>

This analysis of Bush's use of a religious rhetorical form might appear unconventional for a second, more personal, reason. Bush was painfully shy when it came to speaking about religion in public. In remarkable contrast to his son, George W. Bush (profiled in chapter VII), the elder Bush was simply not given to public discussion of what he considered to be private matters like religion. Bush's awkwardness with this topic has not escaped the attention of scholars or biographers.<sup>15</sup> One biographer explained that Bush was "clearly a man of faith," but his reticence toward open expression of his religion often cost him politically:

He was once asked what he thought about as he floated in the ocean for those desperate hours after being shot down near Japan. He answered, 'Mom and Dad, about our country, about God . . . and about the separation of church and state.' It sounded to some like he was shoving every

religious phrase he could remember into a single sentence. It did not wash with the Religious Right, particularly when they compared Bush with the warm and articulate Pat Robertson or the weepy Baptist governor from Little Rock named Bill Clinton.<sup>16</sup>

Despite his discomfort with the subject of his personal religion and his inability to placate his mercurial critics from the Religious Right; Bush's Persian Gulf War discourse offered atonement—a religious rhetorical form central to both Judaism and Christianity—as a way for America to assuage its collective guilt and do appropriate penance for the Vietnam War by checking the aggression of Saddam Hussein in the Middle East. I will begin by outlining atonement as a religious rhetorical form emerging out of humanity's mythical desire for redemption. Next, I will discuss the bitter Vietnam-era public transgressions to which Bush's Gulf War discourse served as a rejoinder. I will then explore Bush's rhetorical enactment of atonement in a series of speeches and press briefings concerning the Persian Gulf conflict and conclude by pointing out both the short-term political effectiveness of Bush's message and his inability to enact complete national redemption.

### **Atonement as Religious Rhetorical Form**

The concept of atonement arises from the collective and personal desire for redemption. Religion is nothing if not concerned about redemption. The global salience of redemption in religion is manifested in both the individual and collective redemption rituals of faiths throughout the world. The expansive thought of Romanian intellectual and religious historian Mircea Eliade and the classic explorations of aboriginal totemic religions conducted by French sociologist Emile Durkheim are quite revealing on this point. In his much-heralded work *The Sacred and the Profane* Eliade explains that in religious communities around the world, whether ancient or modern, there is an



“immemorial theme of the second birth.”<sup>17</sup> Eliade does not ascribe the importance of second birth to the individual alone since it is impossible for a close-knit tribal community of the type he is describing to sustain itself apart from the initiatory and funerary rites he describes.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Durkheim’s description of the rituals enacted by initiates seeking full adult membership within their tribal associations bespeaks this idea that the redemption of individuals is, in a very real sense, a perpetual reconstitution and redemption of the larger community.<sup>19</sup>

Philosopher and psychologist William James’ *The Varieties of Religious Experience* further illuminates the redemptive elements to be found in religion. James explains that, from a psychological point of view, a person’s conflicted or guilty psychological persona—elements James refers to as “the divided self” or the “sick soul”—can be made well and happy again by achieving a “firmer hold upon religious realities.”<sup>20</sup> Assuming the validity of James’ observation at the individual level, we may surmise that this individualized process of self-reconciliation is observable at the collective level when a nation or group comes to believe that it must atone for either its religious or socio-political sins. As studies of prophetic discourse have documented, religious and political leaders within rhetorically constituted publics from ancient Israel to the contemporary United States have argued that national redemption was available if only the covenant people would turn from their errant ways and fulfill the obligations of their covenant with the Almighty.<sup>21</sup> Jeremiadic discourses of this sort are, of course, highly concerned with the prospect of communal redemption. Yet the renewal of an extant covenant is only one path toward communal redemption. Sometimes the

community seeks atonement so that it can destroy its own sense of guilt rather than merely escaping the impending judgment often prophesied in jeremiads.

David A. Bobbitt's thoughtful and thorough analysis of Dr. Martin Luther King's *I Have a Dream* speech provides us an example of such a rhetorical situation. Bobbitt's study reveals that King's most famous speech swept the nation up into "a redemption drama, in which ontological human guilt, and especially white America's guilt over racism, [was] symbolically purged."<sup>22</sup> Bobbitt accurately identifies redemption as a discursive and ritualistic commonplace of both Judaism and Christianity. He argues that redemption is deeply imbued as a mythical component within the cultural consciousness of King's audience:

Thus, in the context of the civil rights movement, one must consider the range of meanings available to a rhetor in a Judeo-Christian culture such as the America of 1963. If racism is immoral (sinful), then there is by the logic of the cultural practice—the "constitutive" practice—a need to make up for (redeem) that sin; and if there is a need for redemption, then there is a need for some process of purification or cleansing of that sin and its accompanying guilt.<sup>23</sup>

Bobbitt grounds his treatment of King's redemption drama in Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism, specifically the redemption drama to which Burke alluded in several of his works.<sup>24</sup>

In one of his most famous essays, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," Burke discusses Hitler's discursive use of Jews as a scapegoat for Germany's socio-economic problems in *Mein Kampf*. Burke notes that the eventual Nazi dictator's employment of "a bastardized or caricatured version of religious thought" enabled him to offer the dispirited German public of the 1920s and 1930s a rhetorical curative that "hand[ed] over [Germany's] ills to a scapegoat, thereby getting purification by dissociation."<sup>25</sup> As Bobbitt observes, guilt-purification-redemption is perhaps the best representation of

Burke's redemption drama. The drama begins when a group is made to feel guilt or shame over one or a series of transgressions or apparent weaknesses. The group next pursues a rhetorical program that will symbolically kill its collective guilt or shame.<sup>26</sup> This collective process of killing the scapegoat is what brings the community back into happiness and balance now that its guilt and shame have been purged. As such, a rhetor who can effectively enact such a redemption drama presents a political shibboleth of communal redemption. Burke himself seems to have summed up this drama best in a poem included in *The Rhetoric of Religion*:

Here are the steps  
In the Iron Law of History  
That welds Order and Sacrifice:

Order leads to Guilt  
(for who can keep commandments!)  
Guilt needs Redemption  
(for who would not be cleansed!)  
Redemption needs Redeemer  
(which is to say, a Victim!).

Order  
Through Guilt  
To Victimage  
(hence: Cult of the Kill) . . . .<sup>27</sup>

A number of authors have produced insightful studies in support of Burke's idea that communal guilt can be expunged via rhetorical means. Larry A. Williamson's analysis of the media coverage of the June 1998 vicious, racially motivated, dragging death of an African-American man in rural Texas presents us with an instance of redemption rhetorically enacted by a variety of texts generated by a mass public.<sup>28</sup> Williamson reveals that the media coverage of the murder of James Byrd Jr. of Jasper, Texas, and subsequent events tended to frame Byrd's murderers as racist anachronisms

from a long-forgotten era of racial oppression in east Texas. “We [white east Texans] have found our perfect racist scapegoat,” Williamson explains “chastised him in the most graphic and public manner possible, and thereby vicariously purged ourselves of our own racist guilt.”<sup>29</sup> Although public redemption of this type is not inherently harmful, Williamson rightly observes that it “can act to blind us to the subtleties of the [racism] problem.”<sup>30</sup>

Other authors have highlighted the presence of redemptive rhetorical elements in the co-construction of meaning at American war memorials, in corporate discourse designed to regain the trust of the American public, in the telos and praxis of critical scholarship, and in religious and political speeches both obscure and historically significant.<sup>31</sup> As such, redemption is both of interest to scholars of rhetoric and a significant component of American rhetorical consciousness. However, I posit that atonement (the means of attaining redemption) is more than a feature or effect of certain socio-political texts; it is a vibrant religious rhetorical form similar to the other rhetorical forms examined in this dissertation with regard to its distinctive discursive pattern, intellectual history, and ritualistic response to the mythical needs of mass publics. Joy Koesten and Robert C. Rowland provide the clearest and most useful definition of the specific features of atonement in their analysis of President Bill Clinton’s use of the atonement form in his distinct redemption discourses apologizing for Cold War-era nuclear radiation testing on humans, the atrociously-irresponsible studies of the effects of syphilis at the Tuskegee Institute, and the Monica Lewinsky matter.<sup>32</sup> By articulating the central rhetorical features of atonement Koesten and Rowland have uncovered an

instrumental rhetorical form used to attain redemption by the discursive destruction of personal or communal guilt.<sup>33</sup>

Drawing upon the *Unetanneh Tokef* prayer from the liturgy of the Jewish high holy days, Koesten and Rowland argue that repentance, prayer, and charity are “at the core” of atonement (redemptive) discourse.<sup>34</sup> Repentance is the fundamental recognition of one’s sinfulness or the condition of one’s guilt with regard to a particular religious or secular transgression. In Burkean terms, this initial step is indispensable to the redemption drama because the community’s guilt must be defined and articulated before it can be cast upon the scapegoat and symbolically (rhetorically) killed.

The communal guilt begins to be assuaged or killed by what Koesten and Rowland refer to as prayer—not in the sense of communion with the Almighty—but as the dual public assurances that deep self-exploration has occurred which has identified the causes of the transgression and that such transgressions will never occur again. Koesten and Rowland explain that when establishing this phase it is crucial for political rhetors to “offer a thorough examination of the sinful act and reveal a changed attitude or policy to prevent future wrongdoing.”<sup>35</sup>

The third, and perhaps most important, element of the redemption form is what Koesten and Rowland identify as charity. Charity refers to the actions undertaken to make restitution to the wronged party(s). Many religious practitioners the world over believe that the act of making amends to those whom one has wronged also brings one closer to God. Additionally, such efforts also allow the guilty party(s) to purge guilt by suffering through penitential works such as paying restitution to a wronged party. Alternatively if the time for restitution to the wronged party has passed, the penitent

individual or group may make restitution toward someone else in the name of the wronged individual(s). Collective penitence can occur in a variety of ways. Political or organizational leaders may take rhetorical steps to make amends with the public;<sup>36</sup> yet, as Robert Ivie reminds us, American political leaders all too often seek national redemption through the penitence of war.<sup>37</sup> Cultural historian Richard Slotkin also notes that war as a purifier of the polis is a commonplace in Western rhetorical history.<sup>38</sup> However, George H.W. Bush's Persian Gulf discourse is noteworthy in that it is an instance in American history where presidential discourse about one war has been used to atone for the publicly remembered sins of another war.

### **America's Public Guilt over Vietnam**

It is no overstatement to say that the Vietnam War left an indelible scar upon the collective American conscience. From its peculiar (and most likely specious) beginning with the notorious Gulf of Tonkin incident in 1964 until the dramatic abandonment of the American embassy in Saigon in 1975; the war cost some 58,000 American lives and billions of dollars in military resources.<sup>39</sup> American casualties were significant, but the human costs in Southeast Asia were staggering. More than one million combatants from the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) and the Vietcong were killed while civilian deaths in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos are estimated to be between one and five million.<sup>40</sup> This great human tragedy opened deep social and ideological fissures within American society—some of which have remained bitter enough to continue affecting American politics into the twenty-first century.<sup>41</sup> Religious studies Professor Walter Capps probably sums up the war's effects most clearly when he writes that it was “a national trauma, a rupture in the nation's collective consciousness, and a serious and somber challenge to

the ways we wish to think about ourselves, our role in the world, and our place in human history.”<sup>42</sup> The effects of this national trauma are evident on many levels, but have been most pronounced in American political rhetoric in both the bitter disagreements about how to properly memorialize the war and in the many political discourses which struggled to articulate the “lessons” of America’s Vietnam experience.

Few (if any) American public monuments have been at the center of as much controversy as that which accompanied the opening of the Vietnam Veteran’s Memorial in 1982. The design of the V-shaped wall of black granite bearing the names of the American military personnel killed in the war, or who eventually died as a result of wounds sustained during it, drew bitter criticism from some who believed that its black color, partially subterranean orientation, and lack of an American flag or more traditional statuary nearby (in the initial design) was indicative of American shame over the war.<sup>43</sup> Some critics likened the structure to a public urinal and even suggested that the monument designer Maya Lin’s Asian ancestry was an affront to the memory of American veterans. In spite of these criticisms, which nearly killed the project, the monument opened in November of 1982 and (thanks to its dialogic components which invite the visitors to interpret the war as they wish) has become a site for personal and communal healing and the building and rebuilding of collective memory about the war.<sup>44</sup>

The controversy over the military and socio-political lessons of Vietnam, however, has proven far more difficult to resolve. Robert J. McMahon correctly notes that every American president from Gerald Ford to Bill Clinton struggled considerably when attempting to draw lessons from Vietnam because of the strongly negative public perceptions of it.<sup>45</sup> McMahon contends that presidents have often tried to dismiss or

transcend the public's memories of Vietnam instead of offering a "genuine reckoning" or any sort of reflective "national self-criticism."<sup>46</sup> While McMahon's analysis fails to point out George Bush's use of the atonement form in his discursive handling of public memory over Vietnam, he is quite correct about the rhetorical constraints placed upon American presidents by the public memory of Vietnam. American public memory of Vietnam contains four features which make this so.

First, Vietnam has become synonymous with socio-political division. While the war was still yet to reach its height, Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. commented in 1967 that, aside from wrecking Lyndon Johnson's "Great Society" program, the war was producing "ugly side effects: inflation; frustration; indignation; protest; panic; angry divisions within the national community. . . ."<sup>47</sup> Schlesinger's early assessments of the war's divisiveness were born out as American public support of the war continued its slow, but steady, decline. In the late sixties and early seventies demonstrations against the war became louder and more bitter than they had ever been before as entire cross-sections of American society from the most liberal to the most conservative began to join in the protests.<sup>48</sup> From this point on, there was little doubt about either the war's divisiveness or its corrosive effects upon American political discourse. Official political action had become equally poisonous as evidenced by the Nixon White House in the imbroglio over the *Pentagon Papers*.<sup>49</sup> Thus, the general public discourse about Vietnam would take on much of the widespread bitterness and division which imbued the public protests and political discourse of the era.

Vietnam also came to symbolize a hopelessly protracted military conflict with poorly-defined objectives. While the belief in the uncertainty about the military mission



was prevalent throughout the war, this thesis was most clearly articulated by U.S. Army Colonel Harry Summers in his book *On Strategy*. Summers argues that U.S. military strategy had been fundamentally flawed due to the policies of containment, gradual escalation, and micromanagement by political leadership. By trying to react to and repel military incursions from northern Vietnam into the south, as opposed to conducting offensive operations designed to destroy the North Vietnamese Army early in the war; the U.S. military inadvertently assured an indefinite stalemate. As Summers explains: “instead of orienting on North Vietnam—the source of the war—we turned our attention to the symptom—the guerrilla war in the south.”<sup>50</sup> These fundamental miscalculations “resulted in confusion throughout the national security establishment. . .”<sup>51</sup> which made an unambiguous military victory in Vietnam all but impossible. Right or wrong, Summers’ thesis became engrained in the public consciousness about the war giving rise to the belief of conservatives and moderates on the political Right such as Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush respectively that American military and civilian leaders simply did not “go all out” to win.

A third source of guilt in America’s public memory over Vietnam had to do with the bitterness of perceived failure. In the early years of the war Lyndon Johnson epitomized the frustrations of many Americans who wondered why the United States with all its military and technological might could not easily defeat “this damn little pissant country” in Southeast Asia.<sup>52</sup> The conflict in Vietnam simply did not correlate with the nation’s experience in WWII with what was widely perceived to be an unambiguous victory achieved by hard work and high purpose. Americans were simply unaccustomed to failure—especially military failure. Johnson and Nixon both worried that an admission

of failure to save South Vietnam from the advance of Communism would erode American geopolitical influence. While the rise or decline of something like global influence is difficult to gauge, the rhetoric of Presidents Johnson and Nixon clearly evinced a concern for America's global standing as a reason to remain engaged in Vietnam.<sup>53</sup> However, American public consciousness highlights not so much a loss of global prestige, but the bitterness of a failed effort.

Finally, America's most persistent public guilt resulted from the perception that it had greeted its returning Vietnam veterans with contempt and antipathy rather than with a warm welcome and appreciation. Accurate or not, American public consciousness records that returning Vietnam veterans were (at best) not thanked for their service and (at worst) reviled for it as "murderers" and "baby killers." Reports of the ubiquitous search-and-destroy missions throughout the Vietnamese countryside and the widely-reported massacre at My Lai seemed to feed public antipathy toward the service of American veterans. There is evidence to suggest that press coverage of veterans was largely fair and that instances of returning veterans being abused by protestors tended to be relatively isolated instances.<sup>54</sup> Yet, Vietnam veterans were never warmly welcomed home by the nation in general. The same held true for most political leaders who knew the political danger of appearing to embrace too closely the increasingly unpopular war. As such, the nation was plagued by a sense of national guilt over the perception that it had not properly welcomed home its soldiers who had fought bravely in a losing effort. While George Bush would respond to each of these four topoi in an effort to assuage the nation's guilt; some of his most passionate responses near the end of the Persian Gulf

War would be directed at atoning for the perceived shameful treatment of returning Vietnam veterans.

### **“Kicking the Vietnam Syndrome”**

From the very outset of his presidency, George H.W. Bush was concerned about the lingering socio-political divisiveness he perceived to be one of the chief consequences of the Vietnam War. In his inaugural address he decried the type of partisanship that made politicians and citizens “untrusting of each other.”<sup>55</sup> Although he argued that the memory of Vietnam “cleaves us still” he appeared unwavering in his conviction that “The final lesson of Vietnam is that no great nation can long afford to be sundered by a memory.”<sup>56</sup> Bush’s verbs “cleaves” and “sundered” give clear indication of the power he believed Vietnam held over the national psyche—and perhaps the power it held over his own political worldview. Yet, Bush’s identification of the Vietnam War and all the division that went along with it as “a memory” belies this interpretation because his use of the term gives the impression that he means that it is “merely a memory.” The clumsy binary (memory vs. a great nation) itself should be taken as evidence of McMahon’s thesis about the rhetorical difficulties inherent to American presidents when discussing Vietnam.<sup>57</sup> However, it also provides evidence that Bush believed that collective national redemption from the Vietnam experience was an urgent need.<sup>58</sup> In spite of this call for political healing, Bush did relatively little to explicitly exorcise the national demons left over from Vietnam until Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990.<sup>59</sup>

Bush’s early statements on the Persian Gulf crisis were grounded in his conception of the “new world order” where violent aggression and lawlessness would have no legitimate standing. Hussein’s actions were deemed evil primarily because they

stood in contrast to the expectations of the new world order.<sup>60</sup> Once the international coalition had formed, U.S. and other coalition forces had been dispatched to the Persian Gulf, and the debate about the prospect of war began in earnest, Bush began to mention Vietnam in conjunction with the looming conflict. At first, Bush's Persian Gulf War discourse appeared to demonstrate relatively little interest in actually atoning for Vietnam. He merely wished, at first, to demonstrate that the bitter public memories of Vietnam would not be relived in the coming struggle.<sup>61</sup>

Bush's first explicit references to Vietnam in relation to the Persian Gulf conflict came during a press conference on November 30, 1990:

In our country, I know that there are fears about another Vietnam. Let me assure you, should military action be required, this will not be another Vietnam. This will not be a protracted, drawn-out war. The forces arrayed are different. The opposition is different. The resupply of Saddam's military would be very different. The countries united against him in the United Nations are different. The topography of Kuwait is different. And the motivation of our all-volunteer force is superb. I want peace. I want peace, not war. But if there must be war, we will not permit our troops to have their hands tied behind their backs. And I pledge to you: There will not be any murky ending. If one American soldier has to go into battle, that soldier will have enough force behind him to win and then get out as soon as possible, as soon as the U.N. objectives have been achieved. I will never—ever—agree to a halfway effort.<sup>62</sup>

Bush made explicit reference to Vietnam two other times during the press conference—each time swearing that history would not repeat itself, that any war in the Persian Gulf would not be another Vietnam. At this press conference Bush engaged the perceived public transgressions that defined the Vietnam syndrome and incorporated his responses to them as an essential component of his war discourse. In the press conference excerpted above, Bush specifically vowed that any conflict would be engaged with a maximum military and diplomatic effort. No Vietnam-style half measures would be permitted while

he was Commander-in-Chief. While his statements at this press conference did not fully enact the features of atonement, Bush made an initial foray into the atonement form by offering the prayer that the nation's sin of failing to bring a maximum effort to the war in Vietnam would not be repeated. From this point on until victory became apparent President Bush often reiterated this pledge.<sup>63</sup>

During the first several days of the conflict Bush continued to distinguish between the present conflict and Vietnam. In his speech to the nation as the war began on the night of January 16, 1991 Bush reiterated American objectives and pledged that American troops would leave as soon as the mission was completed. At a press conference on January 17, 1991 he announced that "the operation is going forward with great success," told reporters that he was not concerned about "unwarranted optimism" (apparently there was no reason for anything but optimism) and again expressed a desire to keep American and civilian casualties at "an absolute minimum."<sup>64</sup>

Seemingly concerned about even a scintilla of the Vietnam-era protest or division, Bush used his January 18, 1991 press conference to sweep aside such issues. "This country is united," he insisted and proceeded to offer the following explanation:

Yes, there's some protest, but this country is fundamentally united. And I want that message to go out to every kid that is over there serving this country. I saw in the paper a comment by one who worried—from seeing demonstrations here and there in this country on television—that that expressed the will of the country. So, to those troops over there, let me just take this opportunity to say your country is supporting you—the Congress overwhelmingly endorsed that. Let there be no doubt in the minds of any of you: You have the full and unified support of the United States of America. So, I salute them. They deserve our full support, and they are our finest.<sup>65</sup>

Bush's commentary on the war protests and his none-too-subtle implication that war protestors were unsupportive of the troops was undoubtedly calculated to stifle dissent in

the manner described by Kathryn Olson. Yet, the comment also marked something of a discursive turning point in the way Bush addressed the war. While he would continue to discuss the differences between Vietnam and the Persian Gulf conflict, much of the rest of Bush's Persian Gulf War discourse would focus upon how America could regain its international reputation and its self respect through atoning for its shoddy treatment of Vietnam veterans by giving the Gulf War veterans "the love and respect of a grateful nation"<sup>66</sup> and, of course, by winning the war.

In his speech to the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters on January 28, 1991 (nearly two weeks into the air war) Bush not only reiterated the pledge that this would not be another Vietnam but opined that, despite the protests, the nation was united in the war effort:

I know—that some disagree with the course that I've taken, and I have no bitterness in my heart about that at all, no anger. I am convinced that we are doing the right thing. And tolerance is a virtue, not a vice. But with the support and prayers of so many, there can be no question in the minds of our soldiers or in the minds of our enemy about what Americans think.<sup>67</sup>

Notice that the concerns of protestors were again dismissed as not being reflective of "what Americans think." Clearly the Persian Gulf conflict was different from Vietnam in that the Commander in Chief loathed even acknowledging the existence of dissenting opinions. If complete national unity could not be had by the absence of protest, it would be rhetorically imposed by presidential dismissal.

Yet the dismissal of political opposition was inherently redemptive. It was, apparently, necessary to reject the concerns of the protestors in order to obtain unity, which would produce strong purpose, which would in turn result in the redemption of the nation. As Bush claimed a few moments later in the address: "When this war is over, the

United States, its credibility and its reliability restored, will have a key leadership role in helping to bring peace to the rest of the Middle East.”<sup>68</sup> Thus, one sees the basic structure of the atonement form. He pledged that this would not be another Vietnam with regard to the political divisions it caused, thereby identifying one of the Vietnam-era sins (repentance). He pointed out that the nation would not repeat the type of division it suffered during Vietnam because the situation was different, the government and military had undertaken the present conflict more carefully, and the nation was fundamentally united (prayer). Finally, he opined that the nation’s efforts to expel Saddam Hussein’s forces from Kuwait would be penitential (charity) in that they will restore the international credibility of the United States and enable it to act as an agent of peace in the region. Thus, Bush maintained the repentance, prayer, charity pattern of the atonement form.

Bush repeated this basic atonement pattern with regard to America’s international reputation numerous times in remarks before reporters. The clearest statement of which occurred on February 17<sup>th</sup>:

The American people are strongly in support not only of the troops but of these objectives. And, of course, that is a very important point because it is my hope that when this is over we will have kicked the Vietnam syndrome. And the country’s pulling together, unlike any time—in this kind of situation—any time since World War II. And that’s a good thing for our country. And that sends a strong signal for the future that we’re committed to justice, and we are determined to fulfill our obligations in trying to bring about a more peaceful world order.<sup>69</sup>

Clearly, dispensing with the Vietnam syndrome involved a rehabilitation of the United States’ international reputation. What is equally clear from Bush’s statements, however, is that the redemption of America’s international reputation and its own self concept went hand in hand. Bush’s talk of “pulling together” and his allusion to a type of national unity

unparalleled since World War II bears this out. As such, the Persian Gulf War would both restore Kuwaiti sovereignty and redeem America from the Vietnam-era idea that portrayed it as a nation in decline. Nevertheless, restoration of the national reputation was only one area wherein the nation required redemption. As the war came to an end and many of the veterans of Operation Desert Storm began returning home, Bush made clear that their sacrifices and the way in which the nation welcomed them home was doing much to heal the national soul and redeem it from Vietnam.

With victory assured by the 100-hour-success of the ground war Bush felt quite comfortable proclaiming that March 1, 1991 was “a proud day for America. And, by God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all.”<sup>70</sup> That same day he explained that he was “beginning to feel that the joy that Americans all feel now is proper” and that “there is something noble and majestic about patriotism in this country now.”<sup>71</sup> He was more poetic the following day in a radio address wherein he expressed his pride in and thanks to U.S. troops for the way they had conducted the war. Because of what they did, Bush opined “Americans today are confident of our country, confident of our future, and most of all, confident about you.” He then explicitly claimed that the Vietnam syndrome was literally dead and buried: “We promised this would not be another Vietnam. And we kept that promise. The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”<sup>72</sup> The burial metaphor was hardly coincidental in light of Bush’s use of the atonement form. The promise that one’s offending behavior will never be repeated—and that tangible steps to assure this have been taken—is an element inherent to both prayer and charity. Bush effectively argued that America’s success in the Arabian Peninsula cancelled the sins of the Vietnam era.



Up to this point in Bush's discourse much of the Vietnam specter had been defined by the domestic political divisions of the Vietnam era and the loss of American reputation abroad. Yet, for the next several months as the troops came home from the Persian Gulf, Bush added a new dimension to that dead specter—he claimed that the United States was now prepared to properly thank its Vietnam veterans. Speaking to a group of American veterans Bush had this to say on March 4, 1991:

I made a comment right here at this podium the other day about shedding the divisions that incurred from the Vietnam war. And I want to repeat and say especially to the Vietnam veterans that are here—and I just had the pleasure of meeting some in the hall—its long overdue. It is long overdue that we kicked the Vietnam syndrome, because many veterans from that conflict came back and did not receive the proper acclaim that they deserve—that this nation was divided and we weren't as grateful as we should be. So somehow, when these troops come home, I hope that message goes out to those that served this country in the Vietnam war that we appreciate their service as well.<sup>73</sup>

Here Bush's use of the atonement form was something of a reversal of the typical redemptive pattern Burke describes as the cult of the kill. Instead of chastising a scapegoat as representative of the community's sins, Bush herein lauds U.S. forces involved in the Persian Gulf as representative of America's best and said that their victory was also the victory of the Vietnam veterans. The homecoming enjoyed by veterans of the Gulf War was also a belated warm welcome home for America's Vietnam veterans. This passage is a clear example of the charity component of the atonement form identified by Koesten and Rowland. Bush had identified a series of national transgressions of the Vietnam era—not the least of which was the way it treated its returning veterans—and then proceeded to rhetorically enact public restitution for these wrongs.

Bush elaborated upon this theme at a moving ceremony for returning Gulf War veterans in Sumter, South Carolina on March 17, 1991. Bush asserted that the performance of America's Gulf War veterans had given rise to a new spirit of American patriotism which had helped the nation "give proper recognition to the Vietnam veterans. Their time has come."<sup>74</sup> Not only had their time come, but the results of the war symbolized a new liberation and redemption for the nation: "You know, you all not only helped liberate Kuwait, you helped this country liberate itself from old ghosts and doubts. And when you left it was still fashionable to question America's decency . . . courage . . . and resolve. No one, no one in the whole world doubts us anymore."<sup>75</sup>

Bush's allusion to the doubts and ghosts from the Vietnam era punctuated the point that the war had changed things—the United States had indeed redeemed its present and past selves through victory and violence. "Our successes," Bush told the commencement audience at the University of Michigan two months later, "have banished the Vietnam-era phantoms of doubt and distrust."<sup>76</sup> Yet it would have been rhetorically undesirable for Bush to have claimed that the resurgence in American patriotism he lauded was the product of a military victory alone. It is quite common for leaders political or religious to suggest that a military victory is a sign of divine favor, but such claims would surely have been seen as presumptuous to contemporary ears. But, by cloaking this claim in the atonement form, Bush made the more palatable claim that America's involvement in the Persian Gulf War was also a way to rectify its prior wrongs. His use of the atonement form throughout his Persian Gulf War discourse suggested that America's proud self confidence had returned because the country had finally found

redemption from the divisions and losses of confidence and prestige resulting from the Vietnam War.

### **An Incomplete Redemption**

Viewing Bush's Persian Gulf War discourse as a set of political texts influenced by the religious rhetorical form of atonement provides a satisfying and nuanced way of explaining the public appeal of Bush's messages to the nation during the war. Despite his penchants for dry delivery, questionable syntax, and his own self-acknowledged difficulty articulating a national vision, presidential scholar George C. Edwards III reports that Bush's public approval soared to an un-heard-of height of eighty-nine percent near the denouement of the war.<sup>77</sup> While one can hardly attribute Bush's stratospheric public approval rating to the effectiveness of his rhetoric alone, it seems unwise to ignore his rhetoric or to attribute his high ratings to little more than a "rally event" or public admiration of his talent for behind-the-scenes diplomacy.<sup>78</sup>

Accordingly, one should view Bush's enactment of national atonement as something which, despite his lack of rhetorical talent, allowed the nation to become caught up in a compelling rhetorical vision of a nation—once thought to be in decline—but now seen to be on the rise once again. In short, Bush's atonement helped turn the national consciousness away from the public transgressions of Vietnam and resurrected a sense of unqualified pride in and respect for the U.S. military that had been diminished since the Vietnam War. Historian Steve A. Yetiv argues that although Bush was unable to win a second term in office, "he did leave behind an America proud of its armed forces. . . . helped some Americans heal lingering wounds from the Vietnam debacle, elevated the reputation of the U.S. armed forces at home, and restored pride in American efficiency

and ingenuity.”<sup>79</sup> The thousands of pieces of personal correspondence which flooded the White House during the war were indicative of these feelings of renewed pride in the military. One Anglican priest was so taken by Bush’s claim of renewed national pride that he included the following request in his letter to the president:

This may not be a very “priestly” request, but I would consider it to be a very personal favor to me . . . and old Anglican Priest down here in Houston, Texas . . . . Please, if you can, pass along to the proper military personel [sic] who re-load our aircraft with armed missiles . . . to inscribe (for me) an appropriate message on one of them . . . perhaps: “UP YOUR’S Saddam” would do very nicely . . . . and make it “from Father Bill.”<sup>80</sup> [ellipses in original]

Bush’s use of the atonement form and the symbolic killing of national guilt it enacted also temporarily reinvigorated his presidency. Bush’s broken “read my lips: no new taxes” campaign pledge and harsh budget battles with the Congress in 1990 had placed his public popularity in peril. The atonement form that Bush employed in the context of a militaristic rhetorical situation, led many Americans to see Bush as a strong leader of a resurgent nation. In this way, Bush’s rhetoric of atonement was a remarkable short-term political success—and one of the relatively few rhetorical successes of his presidency.

Despite Bush’s claim that the nation’s military victory had permanently destroyed the Vietnam syndrome, several of Bush’s policy and rhetorical decisions in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War suggested otherwise. Most notably, Bush’s failure to provide military support to Kurdish and Shiite rebels trying to topple Saddam Hussein in Iraq was evidence that—at least in terms of American foreign policy discourse—the epitaph for the Vietnam syndrome may have been written prematurely.

During the war Bush encouraged the Iraqi military and civilian groups to “take matters into their own hands”<sup>81</sup> by forcing Hussein out of power. As American forces

began to leave Iraq in March of 1991, Kurdish guerillas in northern Iraq and Shiite insurgents in the south attempted to do just that. After many initial successes on both fronts, the rebels were brutally crushed by units of Hussein's elite Republican Guards who had been kept out of much of the fighting with U.S. and coalition forces. What resulted was a military and humanitarian crisis—the scope of which was just becoming clear by mid-April of 1991 as Kurdish refugees by the thousands began streaming into southern Turkey.<sup>82</sup> When some critics of the Bush administration advised strong military action be taken to protect the rebels or at least attempt to destroy elements of the Iraqi Republican Guard, Bush's reply revealed the depth to which fears of another Vietnam continued to hold sway in American foreign policy discourse.

While the Bush administration lent its support to United Nations efforts to establish “no-fly-zones” in the north and south of Iraq to protect the rebels, Bush was resolved that no further military action would be taken: “I am not going to involve any American troops in a civil war in Iraq. They are not going to be going in there to do what some of my severest critics early on now seem to want me to do. I want these kids to come home.”<sup>83</sup> When questioned by reporters about the inconsistency of his calls for an Iraqi revolt while refusing to offer military support Bush, although defensive, could say little to clearly absolve his administration's potential complicity in the humanitarian crisis that was unfolding.

And you're asking me if I foresaw the size of the Kurdish refugee problem? The answer is: No, I did not. But do I think that the United States should bear guilt because of suggesting that the Iraqi people take matters into their own hands, with the implication being given by some that the United States would be there to support them militarily? That was not true. We never implied that. Do I think the answer is now for Saddam Hussein to be kicked out? Absolutely. . . . I don't concede encouraging an exodus. I did suggest—and its well documented—what I thought would be good is if the Iraqi people would take

matters into their own hands and kick Saddam Hussein out. I still feel that way, and I still hope they do.<sup>84</sup>

Bush's reticence to aggressively deploy U.S. military forces to protect the rebels or topple Hussein was reflective of the fact that his own rhetoric had constrained the flexibility of his policy making. Although he had suggested that a rebellion against Hussein was in fact a viable means to "instantly stop the bloodshed" and allow Iraq and Iraqis to have "a new lease on life,"<sup>85</sup> Bush could not commit U.S. troops to a relief effort since such an action could have led the nation into "another Vietnam" of protracted conflict without clear objectives. Indeed, Bush's words at this press conference might remind one of the tragic fates which befell many of the citizens of Saigon after the American military's hasty withdrawal ahead of the Communist advance into the city in 1975. This perception of the United States abandoning the Iraqi Kurds and Shiites to their abysmal fates illustrated that America's redemption from Vietnam was incomplete in terms of foreign policy rhetoric and decision making.

Bush's discourse throughout the 1992 presidential campaign also indicated that the lingering effects of the Vietnam syndrome were still very much a part of American politics. For someone who claimed that the specter of Vietnam had been buried in the Arabian Peninsula, Bush was certainly not above reanimating Vietnam and the kinds of political divisions it entailed in order to score points on the campaign trail. At one campaign rally in St. Louis, Missouri Bush chided the Democratic-controlled Congress for its deliberations prior to the war accusing them of "spen[ding] much of the fall parading experts up there to the Congress saying, 'Well, they're going to have another Vietnam. We must avoid it.'"<sup>86</sup> He also celebrated American victory in the Persian Gulf as a victory over all of the "protestors" and "talking heads" who callously suggested that

he “was uncaring about body bag counts.”<sup>87</sup> Of course, Bush can hardly be blamed for discussing the fact that, on balance, the Persian Gulf War turned out better for the United States than many of the experts or his political opponents believed it would. Yet, his comments indicate that he was perfectly willing to capitalize on the divisiveness of Vietnam and the Persian Gulf conflicts in his attempt to be reelected as president. Bush’s own rhetorical choices reflected the incomplete character of America’s redemption from Vietnam.

Bush was also more than willing to reconstitute the political divisions of the Vietnam era when discussing the questionable military draft record of his opponent in the 1992 presidential election—Bill Clinton. Trailing in the polls near the end of the contest, Bush began to mention the inconsistencies of Clinton’s statements about the release of his draft records and his activities during the war.

I have differed with Governor Clinton on the war and on his own service. My position is clear. And some people differed with me on the Vietnam War. But I’ll tell you the thing I do not understand. I simply do not understand a person whose peers are dying in Vietnam, some of whom are held in Hanoi prisons, going to England to organize demonstrations against the United States. We cannot have that. What will he tell a young man or a young woman as Commander in Chief if they said ‘Oh, no, we want to go off and organize demonstrations’?<sup>88</sup>

Fair or not, Bush’s criticism of Clinton’s draft record and activities while a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford University reveals the depth to which Vietnam remained a rhetorical quagmire of American political discourse despite Bush’s claim that it had been destroyed by the Persian Gulf War.

This chapter presents an alternative analysis of George Bush’s speeches on the Persian Gulf War and considers them in light of what they really were—a mixture of successes and failures. Bush did indeed enact national atonement for Vietnam. In this

respect, the atonement form proved to be a successful political shibboleth in the short term. Nevertheless, Bush was ultimately unable to deal with the lingering public guilt about the Vietnam War in a manner that would prevent it from re-emerging as a major fissure in American society and politics. Ultimately, Bush's own use of the atonement form ended harming his own presidency by limiting the range of foreign policy choices he was able to make in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War. As evidenced by partisan charges and counter-charges about the service records of both John Kerry and George W. Bush in the 2004 campaign, the ghosts and doubts that plagued America over the war in Vietnam have continued into the twenty-first century. Moreover, this chapter reveals that political shibboleths are, indeed, complicated things. The use of the atonement form as a political shibboleth in this instance is both comforting and troubling. While it is desirable that societies seek to rectify the wrongs of the past, it is disturbing that war can be employed as the primary means by which the redemption occurs. Is there no non-violent alternative which would have allowed for a rhetorical atonement of America's collective guilt left over from the Vietnam War? Perhaps the time has come to consider Robert Ivie's idea about the "peace-building potential" of rituals?<sup>89</sup> Based upon the foregoing analysis, I would suggest that one way to begin exploring this potential is to examine how such rhetorical rituals and forms (like atonement) are presently used for war so that their rhetorical potency can be adapted toward more peaceful causes.

### Notes

1. George Bush, "Remarks to the Veterans of Foreign Wars National Convention in Indianapolis, Indiana, August 17, 1992," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1992 Book II—July 1 to December 31 1992* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), 1366-1367.

2. Bush used this phrase twice in his public remarks on the day of the invasion. See George Bush, "Remarks and an Exchange with Reporters on the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait, August 2, 1990," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1990 Book II—July 1 to December 31, 1990* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), 1083; George Bush, "Remarks at the Aspen



Institute Symposium in Aspen, Colorado, August 2, 1990,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1990 Book II—July 1 to December 31, 1990* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1991), 1089.

3. Robert L. Ivie has long recognized the tendency of American presidents throughout the twentieth century to describe the nation’s enemies as evil minions to be destroyed in a divine or semi-divine national endeavor. See Robert L. Ivie, “Dwight D. Eisenhower’s ‘Chance for Peace’: Quest or Crusade?,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 1 (1998): 227-243; Robert L. Ivie, “Metaphor and Rhetorical Invention of Cold War ‘Idealists,’” *Communication Monographs* 54 (1987): 165-182; Robert L. Ivie, “The Ideology of Freedom’s ‘Fragility’ in American Foreign Policy Argument,” *Journal of the American Forensic Association* 24 (1987): 27-36; Robert L. Ivie, “Literalizing the Metaphor of Soviet Savagery: President Truman’s Plain Style,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 51 (1986): 91-105; Robert L. Ivie, “Speaking ‘Common Sense’ about the Soviet Threat: Reagan’s Rhetorical Stance,” *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 48 (1984): 39-50. Recently, other scholars have begun to explore just how far such rhetoric can go by examining the religious characteristics of George W. Bush’s war rhetoric and the ultimate themes of good versus evil it employs. See Robert L. Ivie, *Democracy and America’s War on Terror* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2005), 149-152, 155-187; Jim A. Kuypers, *Bush’s War: Media Bias and Justifications for War in a Terrorist Age* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2006), 21, 33, 35-73; John B. Judis, *The Folly of Empire: What George W. Bush Could Learn from Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson* (New York: Scribner, 2004), 18-20, 165-184.

4. George Bush, “Address to the Nation Announcing Allied Military Action in the Persian Gulf, January 16, 1991,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), 44.

5. Bush, “Address to the Nation, January 16, 1991,” 43.

6. Bush, “Address to the Nation, January 16, 1991,” 43.

7. Bush, “Address to the Nation, January 16, 1991,” 43.

8. Bush, “Address to the Nation, January 16, 1991,” 44.

9. Although difficult to define conceptually, many writers have acknowledged the Vietnam syndrome to be either a loss of national confidence as a result of their having been no clear victory, skittishness about deploying the American military on foreign soil, or simply the doubt and division that surrounded the war and the era as a whole. For some descriptions of the syndrome see: Walter H. Capps, *The Unfinished War: Vietnam and the American Conscience* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1982), 2; George C. Herring, *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975 3<sup>rd</sup> ed* (New York: McGraw Hill Inc., 1996), 307-311; Robert D. Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 186; Sonja K. Foss, “Ambiguity as Persuasion: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial,” *Communication Quarterly* 34 (1986), 327. Later in this chapter I provide an alternative definition of the Vietnam syndrome centered around four perceived public transgressions which both marked the Vietnam era and remain an active part of the perpetual creation and re-creation of public consciousness about the war and its meaning in history.

10. For a representative sample of the chapters in this work see Catherine L. Langford, “George Bush’s Struggle with the ‘Vision Thing,’” in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, ed. Martin J. Medhurst (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 19-36; Roy Joseph, “The New World Order: President Bush and the Post-Cold War Era,” in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, 81-101; Holly G. McIntush, “Political Truancy: George Bush’s Claim to the Mantle of ‘Education President,’” in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, 102-118.

11. Kathryn M. Olson, “Constraining Open Deliberation in Times of War: Presidential War Justification for Grenada and the Persian Gulf,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 28 (1991): 64-79.

12. Mary E. Stuckey, "Remembering the Future: Rhetorical Echoes of World War II and Vietnam in George Bush's Public Speech on the Gulf War," *Communication Studies* 43 (1992): 246-256; Kathleen M. German, "Invoking the Glorious War: Framing the Persian Gulf Conflict Through Directive Language," *Southern Communication Journal* 60 (1995): 292-302.
13. Carol K. Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism: Presidents on Political Violence in the Post-World War II Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 104.
14. Although a decidedly different rhetorical strategy than the ones employed in his Gulf War discourse, Bush may also have been rhetorically effective at certain times because he knew when not to speak. William Forrest Harlow argues convincingly that Bush's choice to remain virtually silent in the aftermath of the collapse of the Berlin Wall was the most effective rhetorical strategy available for dealing with a Soviet Union in decline. Harlow further contends that Bush's choice may have hastened German unification. William Forrest Harlow, "And the Wall Came Tumbling Down: Bush's Rhetoric of Silence during German Reunification," in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, 37-55.
15. Bush constantly struggled to win and maintain the support of religious conservatives. Although he largely retained their support in the 1988 and 1992 elections, elements of what some in the Religious Right were disappointed with his moderate record as president on issues like abortion and federal funding for offensive art. See Amy Tilton Jones, "George Bush and the Religious Right," in *The Rhetorical Presidency of George H.W. Bush*, 149-170; Public Broadcasting Service, "The Jesus Factor," *Frontline*, May 20, 2004.
16. Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 19-20.
17. Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask (San Diego: Harcourt, 1987), 201.
18. Eliade is undoubtedly driving at this notion when he describes these rituals as a passage from one incomplete and religiously-immature level of existence to another. See Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 181-182.
19. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 392-400.
20. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2002), 189.
21. Although it is the most well known, the jeremiad is certainly not the only form of prophetic discourse to be used in American political rhetoric. See chapter VI.
22. David A. Bobbitt, *The Rhetoric of Redemption: Kenneth Burke's Redemption Drama and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2004), 29.
23. Bobbitt, *The Rhetoric of Redemption*, 33.
24. For several of the many instances of Burke's treatment of redemption as a logological concept see Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 39-51; Kenneth Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," in *The Philosophy of Literary Form*, 191-220; Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 31-32; Kenneth Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion: Studies in Logology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 3-5, 90-93, 174-178, 294-296.
25. Burke, "The Rhetoric of Hitler's Battle," 199, 202.
26. Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, 253-267.

27. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion*, 4-5.
28. Larry A. Williamson, "Racism, Tolerance, and Perfected Redemption: A Rhetorical Critique of the Dragging Trial," *Southern Communication Journal* 67 (2002): 245-258.
29. Williamson, "Racism, Tolerance, and Perfected Redemption," 255.
30. Williamson, "Racism, Tolerance, and Perfected Redemption," 255.
31. A. Cheree Carlson, "Strategies of Redemption at the Vietnam Veterans' Memorial," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 52 (1988): 203-215; Sonja K. Foss, "Retooling an Image: Chrysler Corporation's Rhetoric of Redemption," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 48 (1984): 75-91; David L. Ross and James A. Benson, "Cultural Change in Ethical Redemption: A Corporate Case Study," *Journal of Business Communication* 32 (1995): 345-362; D. Robert DeChaine, "Magic, Mimesis, and Revolutionary Praxis: Illuminating Walter Benjamin's Rhetoric of Redemption," *Western Journal of Communication* 64 (2000): 285-307; Harry Hazel Jr., "Images of War, Guilt, and Redemption in the First Crusade Speech of Urban II," *Communication Quarterly* 26 (1978): 24-30; Martin J. Medhurst, "McGovern at Wheaton: A Quest for Redemption," *Communication Quarterly* 25 (1977): 32-39.
32. Joy Koesten and Robert C. Rowland, "The Rhetoric of Atonement," *Communication Studies* 55 (2004): 68-87.
33. While their treatment of the atonement form is excellent, I differ with Koesten and Rowland in their assumptions that atonement is only a sub-genre of apologia. Its mythological resonance I believe establishes it as a transcendent rhetorical form and not one merely useful for apologia alone. Koesten and Rowland also suggest that atonement is used only when the traditional means of apologia are unavailable. On the contrary, it would seem that there are occasions whereupon traditional apologia would not only be unavailable but entirely inappropriate such as the political and cultural occasions Koesten and Rowland describe.
34. Koesten and Rowland also define mortification and public confession as components of the atonement form which seems unnecessary since both of these features are already assumed in the enactment of an atonement discourse. Koesten and Rowland, "The Rhetoric of Atonement," 73.
35. Koesten and Rowland, "The Rhetoric of Atonement," 73.
36. Such efforts toward redemption at the corporate level are apparent in corporate efforts to atone for either letting the public down or outright wrongdoing. See Foss, "Retooling an Image," 75-91; Ross and Benson, "Cultural Change in Ethical Redemption," 285-307.
37. See footnote three.
38. For more on this idea see Richard Slotkin, *Regeneration Through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier, 1600-1860* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973; Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth Century America* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).
39. The National Archives, "Statistical Information about Casualties of the Vietnam War," <http://www.archives.gov/research/vietnam-war/casualty-statistics.html> (accessed November 1, 2007).
40. See "Casualties—US vs NVA/VC," [http://www.rjsmith.com/kia\\_tbl.html](http://www.rjsmith.com/kia_tbl.html) (accessed November 1, 2007).
41. This lingering bitterness over the Vietnam War was made manifest in the smear campaign of the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth against Democratic presidential nominee John Kerry in the 2004 presidential campaign. See Moya Ann Ball, "The Role of Vietnam in the 2004 Presidential Election," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 8 (2005): 689-693; G. Mitchell Reyes, "The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth, The Politics of

Realism, and the Manipulation of Vietnam Remembrance in the 2004 Presidential Election,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9 (2006): 571-600.

42. Capps, *The Unfinished War*, 2.

43. For further descriptions of the controversy over the monument’s design see Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace*, 99-100; Foss, “Ambiguity as Persuasion,” 327.

44. Carlson, “Strategies of Redemption,” 204; Foss, “Ambiguity as Persuasion,” 336-339; Peter Ehrenhaus, “The Vietnam Veterans Memorial: An Invitation to Argument,” *Argumentation and Advocacy* 25 (1988), 55, 63; Carole Blair, Marsha S. Jeppeson, and Enrico Pucci, Jr., “Public Memorializing in Postmodernity: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial as Prototype,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 77 (1991), 276-279.

45. See Robert J. McMahon, “Rationalizing Defeat: The Vietnam War in American Presidential Discourse, 1975-1995,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2 (1999): 529-549. For additional analyses of American public officials struggling to articulate the lessons of the Vietnam War see Peter Ehrenhaus, “Commemorating the Unwon War: On Not Remembering Vietnam,” *Journal of Communication* 39 (1989): 96-107; Kenneth Zagacki, “Rhetoric, Failure, and the Presidency: The Case of Vietnam,” *Communication Studies* 43 (1992): 42-55; George N. Dionisopoulos and Steven Goldzwig, “‘The Meaning of Vietnam’: Political Rhetoric as Revisionist Cultural History,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992): 61-79.

46. McMahon, “Rationalizing Defeat,” 530, 545.

47. Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., *The Bitter Heritage: Vietnam and American Democracy, 1941-1966* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1967), 50.

48. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 266-267.

49. Herring, *America’s Longest War*, 267.

50. Harry G. Summers Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1982), 89.

51. Summers, *On Strategy*, 91.

52. Quoted in David Stiles Shipley, “Sacrifice, Victimization, and Mismanagement of Issues: LBJ’s Vietnam Crisis,” *Public Relations Review* 18 (1992), 278.

53. See Cal M. Logue and John H. Patton, “From Ambiguity to Dogma: The Rhetorical Symbols of Lyndon B. Johnson on Vietnam,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 47 (1982): 310-329; Robert A. Vartabedian, “Nixon’s Vietnam Rhetoric: A Case Study of Apologia as Generic Paradox,” *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 50 (1985): 366-381.

54. See Oscar Patterson III, “An Analysis of Coverage of the Vietnam Veteran,” *Journalism Quarterly* 59 (1982): 308-310; Michael Maclear, *The Ten Thousand Day War Vietnam: 1945-1975* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 234.

55. George Bush, “Inaugural Address, January 20, 1989,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1989 Book I—January 20 to June 30, 1989* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), 3.

56. Bush, “Inaugural Address,” 3.

57. See Robert J. McMahon, “Rationalizing Defeat: The Vietnam War in American Presidential Discourse, 1975-1995,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 2 (1999): 529-549.

58. Bush admitted on a number of occasions before and during the war that healing the divisions of the Vietnam war and rehabilitating American global prestige were two of his foremost political objectives. See George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 17, 354, 364, 365, 398, 482, 483, 486, 487.

59. One exception to this was Bush's proclamation of July 28, 1989 as "National POW/MIA Recognition Day." On this occasion he asserted that "the divisions of the Vietnam war are healing," but offered relatively little support to substantiate the claim. George Bush, "Remarks on Signing the National POW/MIA Recognition Day Proclamation, July 28, 1989," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1989 Book II—July 1 to December 31, 1989* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1990), 1032.

60. See Joseph, "The New World Order," 94.

61. Journalist Bob Woodward documents the degree to which the Vietnam syndrome pervaded the hierarchy of the military's civilian leadership in the post-Vietnam era. See Bob Woodward, *The Commanders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), 230.

62. George Bush, "The President's News Conference, November 30, 1990," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1990 Book II—July 1 to December 31 1990* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1991), 1720.

63. The pledge that there would be "no more Vietnams" was made continually in the months prior to the war. Some of the most notable examples of this pledge may be seen in Bush's radio address on January 5, 1991 and his news conferences on January 9, 1991 and January 12, 1991. See George Bush, "Radio Address to the Nation on the Persian Gulf Crisis, January 5, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 10; George Bush, "The President's News Conference on the Persian Gulf Crisis, January 9, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 20; George Bush, "The President's News Conference, January 12, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 32.

64. George Bush, "Exchange with Reporters on the Persian Gulf Conflict, January 17, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 45-46.

65. George Bush, "The President's News Conference on the Persian Gulf Conflict, January 18, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 48.

66. George Bush, "Remarks to the Reserve Officer's Association, January 23, 1991," , " *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 62.

67. George Bush, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, January 28, 1991," , " *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 72.

68. Bush, "Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, January 28, 1991," 72.

69. George Bush, "Exchange with Reporters in Kennebunkport, Maine, February 17, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 151. Bush had also elucidated this theme

at a press conference on February 5, 1991. See George Bush, "The President's New Conference, February 5, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 107.

70. George Bush, "Remarks at the American Legislative Exchange Council, March 1, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 197.

71. George Bush, "The President's News Conference on the Persian Gulf Conflict, March 1, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 201.

72. George Bush, "Radio Address to United States Armed Forces Stationed in the Persian Gulf Region, March 2, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 207. This sentiment was apparently shared by an anonymous cartoonist at a hotel in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia who drew a large stone in the desert inscribed with the epitaph "Here Lies Vietnam." Stephen Budiansky and Bruce B. Auster, "A Force Reborn: How did America's Military Exorcise the Specter of Vietnam? Twenty Years of Tough Self-Criticism and Endless Training," *U.S. News & World Report* March 18, 1991, 30.

73. George Bush, "Remarks to Veterans Service Organizations, March 4, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 209.

74. George Bush, "Remarks at the Community Welcome for Returning Troops in Sumter, South Carolina, March 17, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 280.

75. Bush, "Remarks at the Community Welcome for Returning Troops, March 17, 1991," 280.

76. George Bush, "Remarks at the University of Michigan Commencement Ceremony in Ann Arbor, May 4, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 469.

77. Reported in George C. Edwards III, "George Bush and the Public Presidency: The Politics of Inclusion," in *The Bush Presidency: First Appraisals*, ed. Colin Campbell, S.J. Rockman, & Bert A. Rockman (Chatham: Chatham House Publishers, 1991), 132.

78. George Edwards suggests that Bush's high poll numbers are the product of these two factors. Until and unless evidence is discovered to support the notion that the public rated Bush highly because of his behind-the-scenes diplomatic skills, this explanation remains just a hypothesis. While a "rally event" almost certainly had something to do with Bush's numbers, we must ask why Bush's numbers were also higher than those of other presidents who had faced similar moments of crisis since World War II? One possible answer to this question is that Bush's rhetoric succeeded in creating the public perception that victory in the Gulf War would put Vietnam firmly in the past. See Edwards, "George Bush and the Public Presidency," 132.

79. Steve A. Yetiv, *The Persian Gulf Crisis* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1997), 133.

80. Letter, Reverend Monsignor William Champion to George Bush, February 5, 1991, Speech File Backup Files, Box # 94, Stack G, OA 6856-3, George Bush Presidential Library.

81. See George Bush, "Remarks to Raytheon Missile Systems Plant Employees in Andover, Massachusetts, February 15, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 149; George Bush, "Remarks and an Exchange with Reporters Prior to Discussions with Prince Bandar bin Sultan of

Saudi Arabia, February 28, 1991,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 193. Bush made a similar suggestion on April 3, 1991 that perhaps better relations with Iraq could be established if “his own army would do something about it, maybe we could start over.” See George Bush, “Question-and-Answer Session with Reporters in Hobe Sound, Florida, April 3, 1991,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 322.

82. Stephen R. Graubard, *Mr. Bush’s War: Adventures in the Politics of Illusion* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 173-174; Jean Edward Smith, *George Bush’s War* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1992), 253.

83. George Bush, “Exchange with Reporters on Aid to Iraqi Refugees, April 11, 1991,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 361.

84. George Bush, “Remarks on Assistance for Iraqi Refugees and a News Conference, April 16, 1991,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 380.

85. Bush, “Remarks to Raytheon Missile Systems Plant Employees in Andover, Massachusetts, February 15, 1991,” 149; Bush, “Remarks and an Exchange with Reporters Prior to Discussions with Prince Bandar bi Sultan of Saudi Arabia, February 28, 1991,” 193.

86. George Bush, “Remarks at a Rally in St. Louis, October 30, 1992,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1992 Book II—July 1 to December 31 1992* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1993), 2100.

87. Bush, “Remarks at a Rally in St. Louis, October 30, 1992,” 2100.

88. George Bush, “Remarks to the Community in Paducah, Kentucky, October 27, 1992,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1992 Book II—July 1 to December 31 1992* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1993), 2017. Bush mad a similar statement just a few days before in Secaucus, New Jersey. See George Bush, “Question-and-Answer Session in Secaucus, New Jersey, October 22, 1992,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1992 Book II—July 1 to December 31 1992* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1993), 1927.

89. Robert L. Ivie, “Fighting Terror by Rite of Redemption and Reconciliation,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 10 (2007), 240.

## CHAPTER VI

### WILLIAM J. CLINTON'S "NEW COVENANT": A PROPHECY OF NATIONAL DELIVERANCE

And so today we pledge an end to the era of deadlock and drift, and a new season of American renewal has begun.

Bill Clinton<sup>1</sup>

As he announced his presidential candidacy on October 3, 1991, Arkansas Governor William Jefferson Clinton boldly asserted that “a new kind of leadership, leadership committed to change” was needed to “turn this country around and get it moving again.”<sup>2</sup> While such statements are legion in the announcement speeches of presidential candidates, Clinton provided his audience with more than the usual rhetorical fare in the form of an eloquent religious expression of the type of leadership he was proposing. In what was certainly a swipe at President George H.W. Bush, Clinton conceded that much progress had been made on the foreign policy front resulting in “the death of Communism abroad,” but argued that the domestic policy priorities of the current administration had resulted in “the loss of the American Dream at home.”<sup>3</sup> His prescription for America entailed not just a new administration with new policy objectives, but a complete renewal of the national socio-political culture reflected in the establishment of a new contract between the people and their government. Early in the address, Clinton opined that: “a new covenant” was needed “to rebuild America. . . . Government’s responsibility is to create more opportunity. The people’s responsibility is to make the most of it.”<sup>4</sup> While Clinton did not elaborate on the specific responsibilities of the people as a result of the new covenant, the metaphor became a vital component in



hundreds of his stump speeches and in his major policy addresses throughout the campaign.<sup>5</sup>

As a former law professor and six-term Governor of Arkansas, Clinton was certainly familiar with the concept of a binding agreement between two parties. Yet, he elected to refer to the new political compact he proposed as a covenant rather than a contract. Contracts and covenants are similar in that they each set forth before the parties a series of binding expectations and responsibilities. Both kinds of agreements also typically provide some indication of the consequences that will result if one or both of the parties fail to abide by the terms. Nevertheless, there are a number of differences between the two types of agreements. Aside from the specifically religious origin of the term, a covenant suggests a warm relational intimacy between the parties who enter into one—hence the use of the term in marriage ceremonies and religious rites. When two parties enter into a covenant, the connotative meaning of the term suggests that they will give all of themselves to the agreement out of deep respect (or love) for the other party. Contracts connote no such intimacy. The two parties simply sign on the dotted line.

Clinton's announcement speech would have sounded very differently if he had not used the covenant metaphor. He could not offer the nation a "new contract" because of the rhetorical coldness of the term. Nor could he offer a "New Deal" for that compelling metaphor was taken by a previous Democrat—President Franklin D. Roosevelt. As such Clinton called for a new covenant. He not only used the metaphor while a presidential candidate in 1992 he returned to it as a political shibboleth at an important and politically challenging moment in his presidency—the 1995 State of the Union Address.

Although the new covenant may have been one of Clinton's favorite metaphors, he did not always use it. After taking the oath of office on January 20, 1993, for instance, Clinton inaugurated his presidency by appealing to the theme of national renewal. He accurately suggested that the idea of renewal was older than America itself, yet deeply-ingrained in the public consciousness of modern Americans. After proclaiming the inaugural a celebration of "the mystery of American renewal," he further solemnized and contextualized the occasion by combining the renewal motif with an agricultural metaphor adapted to the cold January day: "by the words we speak and the faces we show the world, we force the spring, a spring reborn in the world's oldest democracy that brings forth the vision and courage to reinvent America."<sup>6</sup> Although Clinton's first inaugural largely conformed to the traditional functions of the genre recognized by rhetorical scholars Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, it was far more than a mere "rehearsal of communal values drawn from the past," or a simple renewal of "the covenant between the president and the people. . . ."<sup>7</sup> Clinton's inaugural proclaimed the coming of a new and brighter era in America. As he put it, "we pledge an end to the era of deadlock and drift, and a new season of American renewal has begun."<sup>8</sup> Clinton's use of the renewal motif in his first inaugural was noteworthy for its eloquence, ubiquity (the words "renew" or "renewal" appeared eight times in the address), and centrality to his larger message of national renewal throughout his presidential campaign and beyond. In short, whether the central metaphor was agricultural or covenantal, the theme of national renewal remained.

A number of rhetorical analysts have evaluated Clinton's rhetorical presidency in light of the prophetic discourse he employed on the campaign trail,<sup>9</sup> in his inaugural

address,<sup>10</sup> and as he articulated the growing threats from domestic and foreign terrorism at the close of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> These studies are informative and accurately acknowledge that Clinton's rhetorical corpus was informed to a large extent by the prophetic discourse found in the sacred texts of Judaism and Christianity. However, as George A. Kennedy and W. Eugene March amply demonstrate, prophetic discourse is not confined solely to the jeremiad with its basic covenant-blame/accusation structure.<sup>12</sup> Although the jeremiad may be one the dominant rhetorical motifs of Hebrew prophecy, the prophets of ancient Israel also foretold of times when the covenant people would be rescued and delivered from their perils by the power of the Almighty.

I argue that Clinton's 1991 campaign discourse, his first inaugural, and his pivotal 1995 State of the Union Address are best understood as prophecies of deliverance. These selections from Clinton's presidential rhetorical corpus merit analysis because all were delivered in times of political transition during which there was uncertainty about the nation's future. Accordingly, Clinton's use of this religious rhetorical form was designed to provide a measure of comfort by dovetailing with an appeal to the extant public mythology of American exceptionalism—the notion that America has had and still holds a special status and destiny among the nations of the Earth. In the 1991 campaign, Clinton presented himself as a political savior who would deliver the nation from its uncertain economic times. In his first inaugural address, Clinton argued that political deliverance had come—not through himself—but because of the work of the American people. In the 1995 State of the Union Address, with his own administration confronting uncertainty, Clinton sought to parlay the deliverance form into a new set of understandings between the exceptional American public and the government—the new

covenant. While other American presidents have used American exceptionalist rhetoric, Clinton's use of it is different. For Clinton, America was exceptional for what it could become rather than what it had been (Ronald Reagan's view). As I will show throughout this analysis, Clinton's deliverance form rhetorically constituted an American community reborn, renewed, and reinvigorated by his leadership. Thus, his deliverance form constituted a political shibboleth of national renewal.

This chapter offers two noteworthy findings. First, in contrast to other presidents who have emphasized renewal, Clinton rhetorically situated American renewal as an element of the future rather than an idealized past. As we will see, this choice was a logical one in light of the rhetorical form in which his message was cast. Second, in contrast to the findings of other studies,<sup>13</sup> this study argues that Clinton's campaign rhetoric was cast not in the form of a jeremiad, but in the prophetic form that George A. Kennedy and W. Eugene March have called a "prophecy of salvation"—which I shall call a prophecy of deliverance.<sup>14</sup> I will proceed by describing the features of the prophecy of deliverance as a religious rhetorical form and accounting for Bill Clinton's personal familiarity with it. Next, I will analyze the candidacy announcement and nomination acceptance address from Clinton's 1992 campaign, his first inaugural address, and the 1995 State of the Union noting especially how Clinton wedded this rhetorical form to the mythology of American exceptionalism. This analysis will allow me to demonstrate how deliverance prophecies are distinct from American political jeremiads. As a result, this chapter will highlight and clarify a distinct religious rhetorical form that has heretofore been little noted nor well understood in the scholarship on American political rhetoric.

Since the conclusion of his presidency, a number of rhetorical scholars have made significant contributions to our understanding of Clinton's rhetorical prowess as a political campaign rhetor<sup>15</sup> and his less-than-inspiring performance as a rhetorical Commander-in-Chief.<sup>16</sup> As previously acknowledged, the observation that President Bill Clinton frequently called upon the rhetorical resources of religion is hardly new. John M. Murphy, for instance, demonstrates that Clinton rhetorically constructed much of his presidential authority to engage the issue of Civil Rights by incorporating or "interanimating" the "historical and cultural echoes" of the African American church.<sup>17</sup> Throughout the essay Murphy rightly notes Clinton's command of scripture and the concepts of prophetic authority and apostleship by his appropriation of "King's voice in a form of prosopopoeia."<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere, Murphy writes of Clinton's new covenant rhetoric likening it to a journey toward the future and Clinton as a president who "sought to prepare the American people for the trip."<sup>19</sup> While the comparison is both interesting and appropriate, Murphy's analysis here is confined only to Clinton's use of the new covenant metaphor in his nomination acceptance address.

Shawn and Trevor Parry-Giles' fascinating study of Clinton's August 28, 1998 speech commemorating the March on Washington likewise notes that Clinton combined the public memories inherent to the occasion with the discourse of forgiveness in an attempt to address the Monica Lewinsky scandal in a more effective manner than he had two weeks earlier in his televised speech on August 17, 1998.<sup>20</sup> Clinton's employment of the discourse of forgiveness has been explored more fully in a pair of studies by Ronald Lee and Matthew H. Barton and Joy Koesten and Robert Rowland. Both accurately acknowledge Clinton's struggle to enact proper repentance in his remarks on August 17,

August 28, and September 11 of 1998. Both of these studies are important touchstones for the present analysis. Lee and Barton note that although he struggled mightily with the confession form, Clinton finally met “the generic demands of religious confession” in his third address on September 11, 1998.<sup>21</sup> Koesten and Rowland explore the concept of religious rhetorical form as they reveal that Clinton was able to use the atonement form as a rhetorical resource in response to public revelations of the Lewinsky scandal. Koesten and Rowland further reveal that Clinton used the atonement form when asking forgiveness for his personal sins and on a public level as a president seeking forgiveness for wrongs perpetrated in his nation’s history.<sup>22</sup>

### **Deliverance Prophecy as a Religious Rhetorical Form**

Like the jeremiad, prophecies of deliverance and salvation trace their roots to ancient Jewish prophecy. Contrary to some descriptions of the jeremiad, biblical prophecy was not always judgmental and foreboding in tone. In fact, March explained that an entire subgenre of biblical prophetic literature was designed as a “prediction of salvation”—a promise from God to rescue the chosen nation from its time of peril.<sup>23</sup>

Several excellent examples of this form exist, including Jeremiah 30: 3-11:

‘For behold, days are coming,’ says the LORD, ‘when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the LORD, and I will bring them back to the land which I gave to their fathers, and they shall take possession of it.’ These are the words which the LORD spoke concerning Israel and Judah: ‘Thus says the LORD: We have heard a cry of panic, of terror, and no peace. Ask now, and see, can a man bear a child? Why then do I see every man with his hands on his loins like a woman in labor? Why has every face turned pale? Alas! that day is so great there is none like it; it is a time of distress for Jacob; yet he shall be saved out of it. ‘And it shall come to pass in that day,’ says the LORD of hosts, ‘that I will break the yoke from off their neck, and I will burst their bonds, and strangers shall no more make servants of them. But they shall serve the LORD their God and David their king, whom I will raise up for them. ‘Then fear not, O Jacob my servant, says

the LORD, nor be dismayed, O Israel; for lo, I will save you from afar, and your offspring from the land of their captivity. Jacob shall return and have quiet and ease, and none shall make him afraid. For I am with you to save you, says the LORD.<sup>24</sup>

Whether the book of Jeremiah was the product of one solitary prophet or, as some scholars argue, the result of several author/redactors, it is startling to find such a reassuring passage in a work which, on balance, appears to foretell the destruction of Judah (the southern kingdom of Israel) as a sovereign kingdom and the fall of Jerusalem. Oxford University biblical scholar Rex Mason notes that the books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi may be interpreted as “prophets of restoration” whose relatively optimistic outlooks foretold that, in the end, the Almighty would restore and save his chosen people “proved a seed-bed for the faith of those [both Jewish and Christian] who followed them.”<sup>25</sup> Other biblical scholars such as Ronald E. Clements of King’s College and Walter Brueggemann of Columbia Theological Seminary have acknowledged similar themes of restoration and deliverance embedded within the texts of major Hebraic prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. Clements claims that Deutero-Isaiah<sup>26</sup> is characterized by several defining ideas including: “Yahweh has not abandoned his people; . . . the salvation of Israel is assured through the Davidic dynasty.”<sup>27</sup> Brueggemann concurs with Clements’ analysis of *Second Isaiah*. He explains that *Second Isaiah* was something quite distinctive in the annals of prophetic discourse:

This great poet of the exile understood that speech which rearranges the pieces and which echoes the management mentality of its contemporaries is not worth the bother. Second Isaiah presumably lived through and knew about the pathos of Lamentations and the rage of Job. Nevertheless, he goes beyond the pathos and rage to speeches of hope and doxology.<sup>28</sup>

Although he and other biblical scholars discern “indispensable precursors” of this message in other prophetic books; Brueggemann considers *Deutero-Isaiah’s* message of

the Almighty's promise to deliver Israel's from its present woes to be "a genuine *novum*."<sup>29</sup> This bold claim appears well founded when considered in conjunction with what may be regarded as the exordium of *Deutero-Isaiah* in *Isaiah* 40: 1-5:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."<sup>30</sup>

At this point it must be acknowledged that the theme of deliverance is many centuries older than the pre-exilic and exilic prophets who employed it. As far as Hebrew culture and religion are concerned, the deliverance theme undoubtedly harkens back to Israel's exodus from Egypt circa 1550 B.C.E. Although it is unnecessary to recount that well known ancient story here, a recollection of the importance of the exodus narrative as a central feature in both Jewish religious practice and as a religious rhetorical form in its own right enables one to appreciate the ancient heritage and rhetorical import of the deliverance form.<sup>31</sup>

In spite of the similarity that both are addressed to a covenant people, the jeremiad and the deliverance rhetorical form are quite distinct. Most obviously, the deliverance form foretells the coming deliverance of a people rather than chastising them for their sinful behavior as the jeremiad typically does. This teleological distinction has important rhetorical implications. Where rhetors using the jeremiad rebuke and chastise, those employing the deliverance form endeavor to reassure the covenant community.



Based upon the works of these biblical scholars, and the biblical examples of deliverance prophecy cited herein, we may conclude that deliverance prophecies constitute a religious rhetorical form comprised of three distinct elements: a description of the current national peril, the promise of deliverance, and specific visions of renewal. The prophet using this form begins by describing the nation's troubled state. As in the previously noted case of Jeremiah 30: 3-11, Israel's oppression was so dire that even the strong men of the community clutched their nervous stomachs out of fear and dread. The depth of suffering evident here serves to intensify the glorious deliverance that will subsequently take place. In the second phase, the prophet promises God's deliverance from the current peril as vividly illustrated by Jeremiah's reference to breaking the yoke that bound the nation in slavery and oppression. Finally, the prophet paints a vivid picture of the forthcoming deliverance by citing specific future occurrences that illustrate the renewal and restoration of the nation. In Jeremiah the text proclaims that "no longer will foreigners enslave them" and "Jacob will again have peace and security". In Isaiah the audience is reassured that "Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain." In short, the form was intended as a hopeful promise of future deliverance and renewal for the nation. While the nation's deliverance is still implicitly contingent upon proper observance of the covenant (as in the jeremiad), the deliverance form assumes that such observance has already occurred and that deliverance is therefore forthcoming.

March reminds us that some such prophecies in the biblical era were considered to be theologically suspect since they were delivered to kings in order to curry favor with the monarch; nevertheless, the variety of circumstances under which prophecies of

deliverance occurred and their occurrence throughout scripture gives indication of a clear prophetic subgenre.<sup>32</sup> This prophetic subgenre eventually grew to become a religious rhetorical form in contemporary and historical American rhetoric—one uniquely suited to the propagation of a public mythology of American exceptionalism.

### **Deliverance and American Exceptionalism**

Surviving evidence suggests that colonial American clergy were equally adept at using both prophecies of deliverance and jeremiads—sometimes even in the same sermon. The Reverend Samuel Dunbar’s election sermon, “The Presence of God with His People,” delivered during the French and Indian War provides an example of the deliverance prophecy as used in the late colonial period. Dunbar equated God’s deliverance of ancient Israel with that of England from the Spanish Armada in the sixteenth century and what he considered to be God’s protection of the New England colonies during the war. The connection between colonial America and ancient Israel was far more than metaphorical as Dunbar explained:

[God] delivers them, in their lowest and most desperate circumstances. When they are surrounded with difficulties and dangers, and reduced to the greatest straits: when they have neither wisdom to contrive, nor power to effect, any way of escape, but, as to any visible means, all hope of being saved is gone; now is God’s times to work: Now will I arise, saith the Lord, and set them in safety. Providence wonderfully steps in, and opens a door of hope and help to them. So it did for Israel in delivering them from Egyptian bondage: then God went forth for the salvation of his people: yea, he rode upon his horses and chariots of salvation, made speed to help and save them. Miraculous appearances and operations of providence, for the deliverance of God’s oppressed, endangered people, may not now be expected; yet God has very strange and unthought ways, to accomplish deliverance for them: as we see, in the deliverance of God’s people, from their Babylonish captivity, and also in the days of Esther.<sup>33</sup>

Although Dunbar’s assertions of deliverance were mingled with exhortations “not to forfeit [God’s protection] by any sinful departure from God,”<sup>34</sup> the rhetorical thrust of

the sermon was a proclamation and celebration of God's deliverance. Despite the perilous dangers surrounding New England, Dunbar asserted that their previous and continued deliverance was a result of the providential favor they enjoyed by virtue of their covenantal relationship with the Almighty as his people.

The deliverance form is equally apparent in the Reverend Samuel Haven's sermon "Joy and Salvation by Christ; His Arm Displayed in the Protestant Cause." Haven's sermon was a history of sorts. He described the early colonial wars with the Indians as Satan's attempt to thwart the purpose of the divine colonial errand. The errand was rescued however by "the puisiant Jehovah" whose "holy arm . . . was made bare in the eyes of all these Indian nations; and the infant church of Christ in America saw the salvation of God."<sup>35</sup> The threat once posed to those Haven assumed to be God's people by the Native Americans was soon eclipsed by the French who had "long endeavoured both by artifice and arms to drive us from this good land which the Lord God gave unto our fathers."<sup>36</sup> In accordance with the deliverance form, Haven included specific examples of God's favor having been visited upon the New England colonies as the war neared its denouement. The Lord had given his people "the vast riches and strength of the Havannah, and the Spanish navy there . . . enriching us with millions in the compass of one year. . . ."<sup>37</sup>

In socio-political terms, the application of the biblical notion of a chosen people to the American colonies was a quintessential expression of American exceptionalism. While Dunbar and Haven's identification of nascent America as a type of biblical Israel may have been bad theology, they were very much in tune with the thoughts of their forbearers and contemporaries. The notion of American exceptionalism has been an

integral part of American culture since colonial times. America's first Puritan colonists believed that their very presence in and success on the continent was the result of divine providence. These beliefs were instilled and reinforced by prominent civil and religious leaders such as the Reverend John Cotton and Massachusetts Governor John Winthrop. In a sermon entitled "God's Promise to His Plantations" delivered to the Winthrop party prior to their departure from England in 1630, Reverend Cotton proclaimed that the group was helping to found a New Israel—a land filled with covenant people chosen by God for special religious and secular purposes.<sup>38</sup> This idea has remained steadfast in the American consciousness and has been used as a component of the rhetorical justifications for rhetorical and historical events such as the American Revolution, westward expansion under the guise of "manifest destiny" and even foreign military intervention.<sup>39</sup> To put it simply, American political and religious leaders have long used various rhetorical expressions from Judaism and Christianity to indicate that America was a special place and that they were a special people. The deliverance prophecy, wherein the rhetor promises that God's chosen people will be delivered from whatever their present afflictions may be, is one religious rhetorical form particularly suited to the rhetorical enactment of such a vision.

The identification of the deliverance form by biblical scholars combined with its use by Haven, Dunbar, and others throughout American history reveals the presence of a legitimate counterpart to the jeremiad as a religious rhetorical form emanating from biblical prophecy. This observation is not intended to diminish the jeremiad form or its importance in American political rhetoric; rather, I mean to observe that the jeremiad is

not the sole form of religious rhetoric to have inspired American political discourse past or present.

### **Bill Clinton's Prophecy of American Deliverance**

Despite never having earned the trust of conservative evangelical Protestant voters, Bill Clinton was, in many ways, one of them. As a child Clinton<sup>40</sup> evinced a strong interest in matters of religion. The origin of Clinton's interest in religion while growing up in Hot Springs, Arkansas is something of a mystery since neither his alcoholic and abusive stepfather Roger Clinton nor his mother Virginia Kelley, were particularly religious.<sup>41</sup> After a two-year stint in a local Catholic school, an eleven-year-old Clinton took it upon himself to get up early nearly every Sunday morning, put on his best suit, and walk with Bible in hand to the Park Place Baptist Church where, according to one report, he was "often waiting at the church before the minister arrived to open the doors."<sup>42</sup> Clinton's interest in religion was apparently more than a peripheral pre-pubescent fad. Like most evangelicals, he claimed to have undergone a public religious conversion. Clinton described the encounter in his autobiography *My Life*:

In 1955, I had absorbed enough of my church's teaching to know that I was a sinner and to want Jesus to save me. So I ran down the aisle at the end of Sunday service, professed my faith in Christ, and asked to be baptized. The Reverend Fitzgerald came to the house to talk to Mother and me. Baptists require an informed profession of faith for baptism; they want people to know what they are doing, as opposed to the Methodists' infant-sprinkling ritual that took Hillary and her brothers out of hell's way.<sup>43</sup>

Apparently Clinton's involvement with his faith went deep enough that he not only made a public profession of it but developed a kind of partisanship about his Baptist heritage.

Clinton's interest in religion also led him to an encounter with the Reverend Billy Graham which played an important role in his thinking about religious and socio-political

matters. This encounter occurred prior to a 1958 Billy Graham crusade in Little Rock, Arkansas where the beloved southern evangelist had threatened to cancel his crusade rather than give in to pressure from some local groups to make it a segregated event. “I loved Billy Graham for doing that,” Clinton recalled “For months after that I regularly sent part of my small allowance to support his ministry.”<sup>44</sup> Although Clinton’s church attendance and adherence to certain Baptist dogmas (such as abstinence from alcohol) became more moderated during his years of study at Georgetown and Oxford; he never renounced his Christian faith and always considered himself a person of faith. After embarking upon his political career, the Clintons joined the Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock. During his years as Governor of Arkansas Clinton submitted himself to the mentorship of Immanuel’s pastor the Reverend Dr. W.O. Vaught who “helped him think his way through a number of thorny moral/political issues, including capital punishment and abortion.”<sup>45</sup>

The central point here is that Clinton’s interest in religion, regular attendance of religious services throughout junior high and high school, and his exploration of the application of religious teachings to his political positions indicates a relatively deep level of familiarity with scripture. As such, there can be little doubt about Clinton’s knowledge of the Bible’s prophetic discourses—those promising punishment as the consequence of sin as well as those which foretold the deliverance of the faithful. The best evidence of Clinton’s familiarity with prophetic deliverance forms (other than the new covenant metaphor) may be seen in his use of *Isaiah* 58: 12 in both his second inaugural address and the 1997 State of the Union message. The passage assures the chosen people that “your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt; you shall raise up the foundations of many

generations; you shall be called the repairer of the breach, the restorer of streets to dwell in.”<sup>46</sup> Clinton admired the verse so much that he placed his hand upon it as he took the oath of office at his second presidential inauguration.<sup>47</sup> Clinton’s use of one of the deliverance form’s signature biblical passages in these prominent texts from his rhetorical corpus must be seen as evidence of his fluency with the language of biblical deliverance prophecy. His use of the deliverance form during the 1992 campaign is most apparent in his 1991 candidacy announcement speech, his 1992 nomination acceptance address, and his 1993 inaugural address.

### **American Deliverance in the 1992 Campaign**

From the very start of his candidacy, Bill Clinton proclaimed that he wanted to bring change to America and its political landscape. Like a deliverance prophet of old, Clinton began his announcement speech by describing what he believed to be the perilous condition of the nation: “I refuse to be part of a generation that celebrates the death of Communism abroad with the loss of the American Dream at home. I refuse to be part of a generation that fails to compete in the global economy and so condemns hard-working Americans to a life of struggle without reward or security.”<sup>48</sup> Clinton’s use of antithesis depicted the stark contrast between America’s soaring foreign policy achievements of the late 1980s and early 90s with the era’s less-than-stellar economic performance. This disparity clarified the national decline out of which Clinton promised to bring the nation.

These prophecy-style injunctions must be read as both convenient charges to level against the Bush administration and indications that the nation (because of the wayward priorities of its leadership) was in danger of losing its very soul. This aspect of the prophetic plot advanced as Clinton opined that his recent travels led him to the

conclusion that “everything we believe in, everything we’ve fought for, is threatened by an administration that refuses to take care of our own, has turned its back on the middle class, and is afraid to change while the world is changing.”<sup>49</sup> Clinton’s use of “we” in the description indicates that although he was indeed castigating the Bush administration, he elected to frame the problems confronting the nation as new challenges produced by the conditions of a changing world. In the end, all that could really be said of the Bush administration was that it simply failed to change with and adapt to the times. Even when he seems to lay the blame for national problems at the feet of President Bush, Clinton could ultimately do little more than describe the problems as events or present conditions rather than full-throated denunciations or declensions from a national covenant.

As indicative of the deliverance prophecy form, Clinton adduced some of the specific problems confronting the beleaguered nation:

Middle class people are spending more hours on the job, spending less time with their children, bringing home a smaller paycheck to pay more for health care and housing and education. Our streets are meaner, our families are broken, our health care is the costliest in the world and we get less for it. The country is headed in the wrong direction fast, . . . and all we get out of Washington is status quo paralysis. No vision, no action, just neglect, selfishness, and division.<sup>50</sup>

While such accusations against the incumbent administration are common in campaign speeches,<sup>51</sup> Clinton was less concerned with blaming the Bush administration than with generating the image of an American community in decline and in need of his leadership. As Clinton himself noted, mere “Bush-bashing” would not help in “confronting the real problems of real people and pointing the way to a better future.”<sup>52</sup>

Clinton continued using the deliverance form by announcing to the assembled audience and thousands watching via satellite (a relatively new occurrence in the early



1990s),<sup>53</sup> that his candidacy would be a “fight for the forgotten middle class.”<sup>54</sup> But how could his presidential campaign dedicated to restoring the endangered American dream in the name of the forgotten middle class best express this lofty aim with a manageable metaphor? Clinton himself supplied the answer: “We need a new covenant to rebuild America. It’s just common sense. Government’s responsibility is to create more opportunity. The people’s responsibility is to make the most of it.”<sup>55</sup> In contemporary political terms, Clinton used the new covenant metaphor to portray himself as a new, centrist, Democrat—one who insisted that the government do more to foster socio-economic opportunity while placing heavy emphasis upon “personal responsibility.” In terms of his announcement speech and subsequent campaign, the metaphor became a handy sobriquet for the national deliverance he promised to provide. In his announcement speech, Clinton pledged “opportunity for all” and then went on to create a laundry list of objectives including education reform, affordable health care, new anti-crime legislation, welfare reform, and a fairer tax system.<sup>56</sup> As in the deliverance form, each of these pledges were representations of the American deliverance which would result from Clinton’s election to the presidency. This function is confirmed by the oft-repeated phrase which preceded many of them “In a Clinton Administration. . . .”<sup>57</sup>

The deliverance form appeared frequently in Clinton’s stump speeches during the 1992 campaign. Yet, his most prominent employment of the form before a national audience occurred during his nomination acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention in New York City on July 16, 1992. In what was his most important address of the campaign up to that time, he began by noting that his acceptance of the party’s nomination was “in the name of all those who do the work and pay the taxes, raise the

kids, and play by the rules, in the name of the hardworking Americans who make up the forgotten middle class . . .”<sup>58</sup> Aside from maintaining fidelity to the message of his announcement speech, Clinton’s invocation of the middle class here comported with the imagery of a beleaguered middle class in need of deliverance.

In contrast to the biblical deliverance prophets who presented themselves as merely vessels whose speech conveyed the Almighty’s divine truth,<sup>59</sup> Clinton presented himself in the nomination acceptance speech as a kind of political savior who would correct the nation’s many socio-economic ills. I am not suggesting that Clinton suffered from any sort of Messiah complex, but that the combination of religious rhetorical form and political praxes on this particular occasion called for a measure of self-exultation. This is apparent in Clinton’s assertion that he was “a product of that [forgotten] middle class.” He recalled never having known his biological father who had died in a car accident prior to his birth and enduring long absences from his mother as a toddler “while she went back to Louisiana to study nursing” in order to “support me and give me a better life.”<sup>60</sup>

Portraying himself a product of the middle class was, of course, politically expedient and was a persistent feature of Clinton’s campaign and presidential rhetoric. As one of Clinton’s presidential speechwriters would later observe, Clinton “saw himself as the mediator between the voters and the elites.”<sup>61</sup> This interpretation is confirmed by the political virtues Clinton claimed he possessed as a result of the hard times of his childhood and the love of his mother. “That’s why” he said “I’ll fight to create high-paying jobs so that parents can afford to raise their children today.”<sup>62</sup> In this way, Clinton assumes much of what Margaret Zulick calls the “prophetic ethos.”<sup>63</sup> Here, Clinton was

not just a herald of deliverance, he was also speaking as one who, through self determination and the supportive influences of others such as his mother, grandparents, and a favorite professor at Georgetown, had made it to the highest echelons of political influence. Such self-exaltation would have been unthinkable for a genuine Old Testament prophet, but as Kenneth Burke reminds us it is the form of a message rather than the content which “is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, it is the form of the message which conveys much of the rhetorical substance. Clinton’s near-Messianic Horatio-Alger-like self description is less important, from a rhetorical perspective, than the substance of the message produced by his choice of rhetorical form—the deliverance that would renew the American community was on its way.

Like the deliverance prophets of old who provided glimpses of what deliverance of the covenant people would look like, Clinton did not stop with merely promising deliverance. Clinton’s articulation of the new covenant in his acceptance speech was both far more poetic and expansive than his candidacy announcement had been. According to Clinton, the new covenant was indeed something new. It was “a solemn agreement between the people and their government based not simply on what each of us can take but what all of us must give to our Nation.”<sup>65</sup> A cynical reader might evaluate this phrase as little more than a reworking of Kennedy’s immortal “ask not what your country can do for you. . . .” Yet Clinton defined the idea as the natural outgrowth of America’s bold vision for the future. As he reminded the delegates and the nation quoting from Proverbs 29: 18 “Where there is no vision, the people perish.”

Clinton's vision of deliverance promised innovative progress and new responsibilities between the people and the government in areas such as the economy, education, community service, healthcare, and tax reform. In the economic sector, for instance, Clinton invited his audience to envision an America:

that says to entrepreneurs and businesspeople: We will give you more incentives and more opportunity than ever before to develop the skills of your workers and to create American jobs and American wealth in the new global economy. But you must do your part, you must be responsible. American companies must act like American companies again, exporting products, not jobs.<sup>66</sup>

In the realm of education Clinton offered this vision:

An America in which the doors of colleges are thrown open once again to the sons and daughters of stenographers and steelworkers. We will say: Everybody can borrow money to go to college. But you must do your part. You must pay it back, from your paychecks or, better yet, by going back home and serving your communities.<sup>67</sup>

And Clinton had a particularly hopeful twinkle in his eye as he articulated what his new covenant would mean with regard to youth community service programs:

Just think of it. Think of it. Millions of energetic young men and women serving their country by policing the streets or teaching the children or caring for the sick. Or working with the elderly and people with disabilities. Or helping your people to say off drugs and out of gangs, giving us all a sense of new hope and limitless possibilities.<sup>68</sup>

Each one of these wide-ranging, poetic refrains was followed by the phrase: "That's what this New Covenant is all about."<sup>69</sup>

Like most nomination acceptance speeches, Clinton's was short on details as to how all this would be accomplished, yet his vision was specific enough to afford the voters an image of a restored and renewed American community. Clinton's vision was particularly compelling in light of America's problems and the general economic pessimism that pervaded the nation as the 1992 campaign neared its end.<sup>70</sup> Although

Clinton's campaign balked at articulating a specific economic policy, his rhetoric of restoration allowed him to position himself as the candidate who would restore economic prosperity as part of his larger agenda of renewal. Additionally, Clinton's new covenant enabled him to present himself as a political moderate—neither a tax-and-spend, big government liberal nor a cold, austere, tax-and-budget-cutting conservative. In short, Clinton used the deliverance form and its new covenant metaphor to present himself as the only candidate who represented what Americans really wanted their country to be.

Some of Clinton's most prosaic rhetoric appeared near the end of the speech as he spoke to the perception that the country needed to be delivered from a problem more consequential than any of the policy issues he had addressed up to that point—the division of the American community itself. As Clinton explained:

Tonight every one of you knows deep in your heart that we are too divided. It is time to heal America. And so we must say to every American: Look beyond the stereotypes that blind us. We need each other—all of us—we need each other. We don't have a person to waste, and yet for too long politicians have told the most of us that are doing all right that what's really wrong with America is the rest of us—they. Them, the minorities. Them, the liberals. Them, the poor. Them, the homeless. Them, the people with disabilities. Them, the gays. We've gotten to where we've nearly them'ed ourselves to death. . . . But this is America. There is no them. There is only us. One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all. That is our Pledge of Allegiance, and that's what the New Covenant is all about.<sup>71</sup>

Despite the banality of his inclusion of the Pledge of Allegiance in these final lines, Clinton endeavored to offer America something new. More to the point, he held himself and his candidacy out as perhaps the last best hope to escape the kind of division which he portrayed as threatening the very existence of the American community.

### **American Deliverance in Clinton's Presidential Rhetoric**

On January 20, 1993 President Clinton used his first inaugural address to proclaim that deliverance had come. True to the deliverance form which had been so much a part of his campaign, he began by presenting the idea that the nation was in deep peril. Although the nation's strength was considerable, it had been "weakened by business failures, stagnant wages, increasing inequality, and deep divisions among our own people."<sup>72</sup> The problem, explained Clinton, was not that the government had neglected its covenant with the citizenry; it had merely failed to adapt to the tenor of the times by "mak[ing] change our friend and not our enemy."<sup>73</sup> His metaphor of "forcing the spring" illustrated this theme by painting a picture of a nation about to move from difficult to more prosperous and hopeful times.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, Clinton remained quite explicit about the problems the nation still faced:

But when most people are working harder for less; when others cannot work at all; when the cost of health care devastates families and threatens to bankrupt our enterprises . . . when the fear of crime robs law abiding citizens of their freedom; and when millions of poor children cannot even imagine the lives we are calling them to lead, we have not made change our friend.<sup>75</sup>

Clinton avoided assigning specific blame for the nation's problems, and seemed to mollify any idea of collective blame when he claimed that there was "nothing wrong with America that cannot be cured by what is right with America."<sup>76</sup> Clinton moved quickly from a discussion of the current perils to his triumphant promise of national deliverance: "And so today we pledge an end to the era of deadlock and drift, and a new season of American renewal has begun."<sup>77</sup>

The deliverance prophecy in Clinton's inaugural address was far humbler than the version of it he used during the campaign. His campaign rhetoric seemed to suggest that

he was a Messiah-like figure. His inaugural shifted the locus of action from himself to the public. He made clear that it was “The American people [who] have summoned the change we celebrate today. . . . you, my fellow Americans, have forced the spring.”<sup>78</sup> He quickly added that forcing the spring entailed doing “the work the season demands.”<sup>79</sup> This change in focus is subtle, yet quite significant. The rhetorical exigencies of the campaign trail demand that a candidate exalt him or herself above their opponents. In Clinton’s case, his use of the deliverance form meant that he would have to appear as a political savior. However, such exaltation would have been inappropriate in an inaugural with its emphasis upon high ceremony and nonpartisan, healing civic ritual. As such, the deliverance prophecy of Clinton’s first inaugural required a new hero for this occasion—the American people. Clinton claimed that, ultimately, it was the American people who would bring about the long-awaited national renewal. Thus, the fulfillment of the deliverance prophecy was the work of everyone—an important realization for a people who already believe themselves to be exceptional.

Consistent with the deliverance form, Clinton closed the speech by providing specific visions of what American renewal would look like in areas such as government reform, economic renewal, and America’s standing as a world leader. Finally, he eloquently invited the audience to participate in its own renewal: “From this joyful mountaintop of celebration we hear a call to service in the valley. . . . And now, each in our own way and with God’s help, we must answer the call.”<sup>80</sup>

Interestingly, Clinton refrained from using the new covenant metaphor in his first inaugural. Speechwriter Michael Waldman reports that Clinton removed large portions from previous drafts of the inaugural which had discussed the new covenant and

enumerated the people's obligations to fulfill the covenant.<sup>81</sup> Apparently Clinton chose to emphasize how the government would reform its ways of dealing with the public rather than highlighting the responsibilities of individual citizens toward the government.

After his election, President Clinton seemed to put his version of the deliverance form into moth balls for the next two years.<sup>82</sup> Despite some notable successes such as securing passage of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Clinton administration struggled mightily during its first two years to enact its political agenda. From the badly-mishandled controversy over Clinton's proposed policy on homosexuals serving in the U.S. armed forces to his failed attempt to reform healthcare, the Clinton administration seemed to produce more political and rhetorical blunders than successes. Many explanations have been offered for the political and rhetorical reverses of the early years of the Clinton presidency. Some alleged that Clinton was an ineffective manager who often tried to work on too many initiatives at once.<sup>83</sup> Others argued that his failure to effectively ingratiate himself with the White House press corps and other media outlets made them more eager to highlight his foibles.<sup>84</sup> Still others claimed that Clinton's desire to avoid confrontation and tendency to over-analyze complicated policy matters caused him to waffle on key issues.<sup>85</sup>

One explanation for Clinton's tribulations relates to his use of the new covenant metaphor. Denise Bostdorff convincingly argues that Clinton's campaign rhetoric which called for a new covenant approach to presidential leadership helped him win the election, but plagued him with problems once in office. "The rhetoric that had helped him win the White House," she explains "now boxed him in politically. Through his transcendent campaign appeals, Clinton had raised expectations, now difficult to fulfill,



that change would come quickly.”<sup>86</sup> Whether or not this rhetorical quandary was a primary cause of Clinton’s difficult first two years as president, Clinton found himself imperiled and in need of political deliverance when his Democratic Party lost control of Congress in 1994 after having held it for the last forty years.

As the date for the 1995 State of the Union message approached, the Clinton White House knew that their rhetorical missteps and the Democratic Party’s defeat in the 1994 election had created a public perception that the administration was flailing. Accordingly, the White House stepped up its campaign to highlight its early accomplishments. While reporting on one such event during the daily press briefing on January 19, 1995 Press Secretary Mike McCurry was grilled by reporters who wondered: “The obvious question is, why is this necessary? If this President has done so much why do people not realize it?”<sup>87</sup> “It seemed” recalls speechwriter Michael Waldman “that Clinton had hit rock bottom. The promise of his presidency seemed ashes.”<sup>88</sup>

Clinton’s immediate audience for the 1995 State of the Union address was full of fresh faces, many of whom were hostile to his agenda. In acknowledgment, Clinton began by noting that the results of both the 1992 and 1994 elections confirmed the nation’s desire for fundamental political change. After spending several minutes recalling how political change had been a bulwark and defining feature of the nation’s history from the days of the founders through the New Deal, Clinton called attention to the nation’s present peril.

But the rising tide is not lifting all boats. While our nation is enjoying peace and prosperity, too many of our people are still working harder and harder for less and less. . . . Our civil life is suffering in America today. Citizens are working together less and shouting at each other more. The common bonds of community which have been the great strength of our country from its very beginning are badly frayed. . . . Our Government, once a champion of national

purpose, is now seen by many as simply a captive of narrow interests, putting more burdens on our citizens rather than equipping them to get ahead. The values that used to hold us all together seem to be coming apart.<sup>89</sup>

The present state of affairs dictated that “a new social compact” was necessary “to meet the challenges of this time.”<sup>90</sup> This new compact would engage the public with “a new set of understandings, not just with Government but, even more important, with one another as Americans.”<sup>91</sup>

Clearly Clinton’s rhetoric posited that America was in need of deliverance. Yet, the exigencies of this particular address required some adaptation of the deliverance form. Rather than implicitly promising that deliverance would arrive with his election as articulated in his campaign rhetoric, the fact that Clinton was already president meant that both the promise and visions of deliverance phases of the rhetorical form needed to be conflated as one. In short, Clinton argued that the deliverance of America was to begin then and there. To highlight this transformation, Clinton devoted considerable attention to the idea that a major corner was being turned with regard to the way that government and citizens interacted.

The New Covenant approach to governing is as different from the old bureaucratic way as the computer is from the manual typewriter. The old way of governing around here protected organized interests. We should look out for the interests of ordinary people. The old way divided us by interest, constituency, or class. The New Covenant way should unite us behind a common vision of what’s best for our country. The old way dispensed services through large, top-down, inflexible bureaucracies. The New Covenant way should shift these resources and decision making from bureaucrats to citizens, injecting choice and competition and individual responsibility into national policy. The old way of governing around here actually seemed to reward failure. The New Covenant way should have built-in incentives to reward success. The old way was centralized here in Washington. The New Covenant way must take hold in the communities all across America. And we should help them to do that.<sup>92</sup>

Of course, Clinton failed to mention that, as the sitting president, he certainly bore some responsibility for the “old way” things were done in Washington. Nevertheless he rather eloquently articulated his hope for the beginning of something new.

Did this address produce the new covenant era in national policy-making that it heralded? Yes and no. While the Clinton administration’s public mishandling of gays in the military and universal healthcare left him open to the hackneyed old charges of being a big government liberal, his 1995 State of the Union message, with its unmistakable rhetorical signatures of political centrism, made such claims from Republicans seem increasingly outmoded. Indeed, Clinton would deliver the *coupe de grace* to such charges one year later when he famously proclaimed in his 1996 State of the Union Address that “The era of big government is over.”<sup>93</sup> This move to the political center undoubtedly aided Clinton as he worked and fought with Republicans over the issue of welfare reform. Clinton’s more centrist approach informed his rhetoric on this issue by enabling him to tap into what Martin Carcasson calls the “anti-welfare culture.”<sup>94</sup> In this sense, Clinton’s use of the deliverance form provided a kind of political deliverance for himself. Indeed, Clinton speechwriter Michael Waldman defined the 1995 State of the Union message as a “comeback” after which “Clinton began to build a new kind of presidency. It was a presidency that depended far more than ever before on the bully pulpit, on his speeches and statements, and on actions he could take on his own.”<sup>95</sup> Clinton’s fortunes were also aided by strong indicators that the American economy was growing rapidly.

As Bostdorff observes of his use of the new covenant in his campaign rhetoric, the metaphor set a lofty standard quite attainable for Clinton the orator but not for Clinton the rhetorical president and policy maker. Clinton did not (because he could not) deliver

on his promise to radically change the way things were done in Washington and the relationship between government and citizenry in the fashion he had described.

America's deliverance from socio-political peril was inhibited by intense battles over the federal budget, the resulting shutdowns of the federal government on two different occasions, the ever-present pall of scandal which seemed to hang over the administration, and the extra-marital affair with a certain White House intern which ultimately led to the Republican's unsuccessful effort to remove Clinton from office via impeachment.

Despite these unfortunate incidents, Clinton's public approval during the aftermath of the Lewinsky scandal and subsequent impeachment actually grew to sixty-seven percent and remained near that level throughout the remainder of his presidency—giving him one of the highest public approval ratings during a president's final month in office since Ronald Reagan.<sup>96</sup>

While space does not permit a full analysis of Clinton's use of the deliverance form through the remainder of his presidency, it must be noted that he continued to employ elements of this religious rhetorical form in high-profile addresses such as his second inaugural, wherein he again promised to help end the bitter partisanship that plagued the government, and his 1997 State of the Union Address where he cited *Isaiah* 58:12 and admonished Congress to aid him in being a "repairer of the breach."<sup>97</sup> I do not posit that Clinton's high approval rating was the result of his use of the deliverance form throughout his presidency, yet there can be little doubt that its message of perpetual American renewal in the face of numerous extant challenges did no harm to his public standing since it lent itself so readily to the extant public mythology of American exceptionalism.

### **Deliverance, Not a Jeremiad**

In both its abstract rhetorical form and its concrete manifestation in Clinton's rhetoric, the deliverance prophecy differs from the jeremiad in several important ways. First, the deliverance form is largely devoid of the explicit warnings and condemnations toward a rhetorically constituted public found in jeremiadic prophecy. While some mild criticism may still take place in this prophetic form, ultimate blame for the nation's problems rests with outsiders rather than members of the chosen nation. As the Reverend Dunbar explained in his war sermon "The Presence of God with His People," "The smiles of God upon them [the chosen nation], make every thing flourishing—God's presence makes their land healthful, their fields fruitful, their merchandize gainful, and their armies successful . . ." <sup>98</sup> Such absence of outright condemnation does not mean that no covenantal obligations exist. Rather, this rhetorical form assumes that the people have and are adhering to the covenant and divine deliverance is coming as a result. This distinction further highlights that the jeremiad and deliverance prophecy are two different religious rhetorical forms for two different kinds of occasions. Second, the deliverance form, like the halfway covenant of the late Puritan era, sought inclusion and assurance <sup>99</sup> as opposed to the jeremiad's message that the audience must mend its ways or face God's judgment. The general absence of condemnation in favor of a more conciliatory tone of the deliverance form illustrates that Clinton's discourse was prophetic, but it was not a jeremiad.

While several excellent scholars have argued that Clinton's pre-presidential and presidential appeals were jeremiads or "jeremiadic" in nature, <sup>100</sup> the rhetoric I have examined here simply does not fit the well-established "promise, declension, prophecy"

pattern of the jeremiad form.<sup>101</sup> The studies that characterize Clinton's rhetoric as a jeremiad generally misinterpret Clinton's description's of national peril to be instances of jeremiadic declension—the act of the people falling away from the covenant because of their sins. This interpretation is problematic in light of the fact that Clinton usually went to great pains to avoid specifically criticizing anyone. Even at his most partisan during the 1992 campaign, Clinton could do little but fault the Bush administration for failing to keep up with changing times. While Clinton's inaugural and campaign rhetoric decried the “drift” and “deadlock” of the political establishment in Washington, D.C., these statements were simply demonstrations of the peril from which Clinton promised to deliver the nation. Clinton assigned no particular sin or violation of the national covenant to George Bush. Likewise, Clinton held the American public particularly blameless since they were hard at work paying their taxes, raising their kids, and playing by the rules as he intoned in his nomination acceptance address.

Perhaps the clearest evidence of distinction between the jeremiad form and Clinton's rhetoric which I have profiled here is the fact that Clinton's primary metaphorical expression of the form was as a new covenant—not an old one. Jeremiads are built upon the notion that the chosen people is in danger of judgment for breaking, or threatening to break, their sacred covenant with the Almighty. One sees something quite different from this in Clinton's rhetoric. Indeed, the lengths to which Clinton went to declare that the new covenant was nothing less than a revolutionary change in the relationship between the government and its citizens reveals that he spoke as a prophet promising deliverance for the afflicted rather than one promising divine judgment and punishment for the covenant breakers.

Years after its conclusion, the presidency of William Jefferson Clinton remains something of a mystery. He was perhaps one of the most intelligent, articulate, and charismatic individuals to ever hold the office. Yet these very strengths occasionally contributed to the problems of his administration. He may also have been one of the most openly religious presidents in recent memory, yet much of his presidential legacy has been needlessly tarnished by scandal because of his own lack of personal discipline. Mysterious though some aspects of his presidency may remain, this chapter has endeavored to help clarify an important element of Clinton's rhetorical presidential legacy. Like predecessors Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George H.W. Bush, Clinton employed a religious rhetorical form as a political shibboleth throughout his campaign for the presidency and during his presidency itself. Clinton's use of rhetorical form is perhaps most noteworthy not for what it says about Clinton, but for what it says about American socio-political culture. Despite the pluralistic nature of our society and democratic principles, the salience of Clinton's deliverance rhetoric indicates that Americans are indeed a people who, believe in our own exceptionalism and are willing to overlook the sins of, and even reward, those who remind us of our potential for progress and renewal in times of hardship. As such, the deliverance form stands as yet another distinct religious rhetorical form that is still quite alive within American socio-political culture, and therefore remains a potentially potent shibboleth in the contemporary American presidency.

### Notes

1. William J. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton—1993 Book I—January 20 to July 31, 1993* (United States Government Printing Office, 1994), 1.

2. Bill Clinton, "Announcement Speech, Old State House, Little Rock, Arkansas, October 3, 1991," 4President.org, <http://www.4president.org/speeches/billclinton1992announcement.htm> (accessed March 2, 2006), ¶ 23, 20.
3. Clinton, "Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991," ¶ 4.
4. Clinton, "Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991," ¶ 27.
5. Craig A. Smith, "The Jeremiadic Logic of Bill Clinton's Policy Speeches." in *Bill Clinton on the Stump, State, and Stage: The Rhetorical Road to the White House*, ed. Stephen A. Smith (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1994), 73.
6. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 1.
7. Campbell and Jamieson write that "The presidential inaugural (1) unifies the audience by reconstituting its members as the people", . . . "rehearses communal values drawn from the past; (3) sets forth the political principles that will govern the new administration; and (4) demonstrates through enactment that the president appreciates the requirements and limitations of executive functions. Finally, (5) each of these ends must be achieved through means appropriate to the epideictic address, . . . a process through which the covenant between the president and the people is renewed." Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Deeds Done in Words: Presidential Rhetoric and the Genres of Governance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 15.
8. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993" 1.
9. See Smith, "The Jeremiadic Logic," 73-100.
10. See David E. Procter and Kurt Ritter, "Inaugurating the Clinton Presidency: Regenerative Rhetoric and the American Community," in *The Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues, and Communication Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Denton & Rachel L. Holloway (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 1-16.
11. Carol K. Winkler, *In the Name of Terrorism: Presidents on Political Violence in the Post-World War II Era* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 138, 145-154.
12. George A. Kennedy, *Classical Rhetoric & Its Christian and Secular Tradition from Ancient to Modern Times 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 142. See also W. Eugene March, "Prophecy," in *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. John H. Hayes (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 1974), 162.
13. Procter and Ritter, "Inaugurating the Clinton Presidency: Regenerative Rhetoric and the American Community," 1-16; Smith, "The Jeremiadic Logic," 73-100.
14. Kennedy and March refer to this rhetorical subgenre as a "prophecy of salvation." The choice to describe this subgenre "deliverance" is my own in light of the telos of such biblical passages.
15. For a fascinating study of Clinton's ability to turn a metaphor to his advantage during a political campaign see William L. Benoit, "Framing Through Temporal Metaphor: The "Bridges" of Bob Dole and Bill Clinton in Their 1996 Acceptance Addresses," *Communication Studies* 52 (2001): 70-84.
16. Both Mary E. Stuckey and Kathryn M. Olson note that Clinton struggled to articulate a compelling vision of American foreign policy with regard to issues such as terrorism and military intervention in the post-Cold War era. See Mary E. Stuckey, "Competing Foreign Policy Visions: Rhetorical Hybrids After the Cold War," *Western Journal of Communication* 59 (1995): 214-227; Kathryn M. Olson, "Democratic Enlargement's Value Hierarchy and Rhetorical Forms: An Analysis of Clinton's Use of a Post-Cold War Symbolic Frame to Justify Military Interventions," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34 (2004): 307-340. Brian J. Snee gives Clinton a bit more credit for his deft rhetorical performance at the Vietnam Memorial



on Memorial Day in 1993. Yet even Snee admits that Clinton's rhetorical investiture as Commander-in-Chief was "awkward" at times. See Brian J. Snee, "Clinton and Vietnam: A Case for Amnestic Rhetoric," *Communication Quarterly* 49 (2001): 189-202.

17. John M. Murphy, "Inventing Authority: Bill Clinton, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Orchestration of Rhetorical Traditions," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83 (1997), 85.

18. Murphy, "Inventing Authority," 82.

19. John M. Murphy, "Cunning, Rhetoric, and the Presidency of William Jefferson Clinton," in *The Presidency and Rhetorical Leadership* ed. Leroy G. Dorsey (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2002), 239.

20. Shawn J. Parry-Giles and Trevor Parry-Giles, "Collective Memory, Political Nostalgia, and the Rhetorical Presidency: Bill Clinton's Commemoration of the March on Washington August 28, 1998," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 86 (2000): 417-437.

21. Ronald Lee and Matthew H. Barton, "Clinton's Rhetoric of Contrition," in *Images, Scandal, and Communication Strategies of the Clinton presidency* ed. Robert E. Denton & Rachel L. Holloway (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 219.

22. Joy Koesten and Robert C. Rowland, "The Rhetoric of Atonement," *Communication Studies* 55 (2004): 68-87.

23. March, "Prophecy," 162. Other scholars recognize "announcements of salvation" as a similar prophetic subgenre. See Gene M. Tucker, *Form Criticism of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 61.

24. Jeremiah 30: 3-11, Revised Standard Version.

25. Rex Mason, "The Prophets of Restoration," in *Israel's Prophetic Tradition: Essays in Honour of Peter R. Ackroyd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 152.

26. Also known as "Second Isaiah" among biblical scholars, chapters 40-55 are so set apart from the remainder of the book by their themes of deliverance, healing, and restoration of God's chosen people that it is assumed that these chapters are either the work of a second (Deutero) Isaiah or that they are the product of some type of redaction by a latter author or authors. These chapters seem to address an Israel that has been exiled to Babylon. See John F.A. Sawyer, "Isaiah, The Book of," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* ed. Bruce M. Metzger & Michael D. Coogan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 325-329.

27. Ronald E. Clements, *Isaiah and the Deliverance of Jerusalem: A Study of the Interpretation of Prophecy in the Old Testament* (Sheffield: Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Press, 1980), 93.

28. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 70.

29. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 70. For additional scholarship on the themes of deliverance in Second Isaiah and other prophetic books see Thomas M. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), 10-15.

30. Isaiah 40: 1-5, Revised Standard Version.

31. Thomas Rosteck and James Darsey both demonstrate the rhetorical power of the exodus narrative. Rosteck explores how Martin Luther King Jr. used the story as a religious rhetorical form to instill "an urgency and a sense of their own destiny" in members of the Civil Rights movement in his famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech. See Thomas Rosteck, "Narrative in Martin Luther King's *I've Been to*

*the Mountaintop*,” *Southern Communication Journal* 58 (1992): 22-32. Likewise, Darsey highlights how colonial American revolutionaries appropriated the exodus story as a compelling rhetorical theme which informed their revolutionary discourse. See James Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition and Radical Rhetoric in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 35-60.

32. March, “Prophecy,” 162. As March points out, some of the varied examples of deliverance prophecies include: Jeremiah 28:2-4, 32:14-15, 32:36-41, 34:4-5, 35: 18-19, I Kings 17: 14, II Kings 3: 16-19.

33. Samuel Dunbar, “The Presence of God with His People,” in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805 Vol. I, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.*, ed . Ellis Sandoz (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998), 215-216.

34. Dunbar, “The Presence of God,” 213.

35. Samuel Haven, “Excerpt from Joy and Salvation by Christ; His Arm Displayed in the Protestant Cause,” in *American Rhetorical Discourse 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.*, ed Ronald F. Reid & James F. Klumpp (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2005), 81.

36. Haven, “Joy and Salvation by Christ,” 81.

37. Haven, “Joy and Salvation by Christ,” 84.

38. Kurt W. Ritter and James R. Andrews, *The American Ideology: Reflections of the Revolution in American Rhetoric* (Annandale: Speech Communication Association, 1978), 17.

39. Ernest Tuveson provides the clearest and most revealing discussion of how this idea contributes to the perception of a divinely-instituted Millennial role for the United States. See Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). James Darsey provides a fascinating discussion of the use of this concept as a justification for the American Revolution. See Darsey, *The Prophetic Tradition*, 39.

40. Clinton’s legal surname was Blythe until he changed it to Clinton at the age of fourteen so that he and his younger half brother Roger Clinton Jr. would have the same last name in school.

41. For thorough discussions of Clinton’s early interest in religion see Robert D. Linder, “Universal Pastor: President Bill Clinton’s Civil Religion,” *Journal of Church and State* 38 (1996): 736-739; James M. Penning, “The Religion of Bill Clinton,” in *Religion and the American Presidency* ed. Mark J. Rozell and Gleaves Whitney (New York: Palgrave, 2007), 192-196.

42. Reported in Penning, “The Religion of Bill Clinton,” 193.

43. Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004), 30.

44. Clinton, *My Life*, 39.

45. Linder, “Universal Pastor,” 740.

46. Isaiah 58: 12, Revised Standard Version.

47. Alison Mitchell, “Clinton, Sworn in for 2D Term, Assails ‘Bickering and Extreme Partisanship,’” *New York Times* (January 21, 1997), A1.

48. Clinton, “Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991,” ¶ 4-5.

49. Clinton, “Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991,” ¶ 9.

50. Clinton, “Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991,” ¶ 14-15.

51. While this aspect of Clinton's prophetic form reads much like a modern jeremiad, one must consider that Clinton was merely drawing attention to the depth of the national morass into which the nation had sunk rather than assigning actual blame as in the jeremiad pattern. I will further highlight these differences later in this study. For more on the modern jeremiad as used in American political rhetoric see Kurt W. Ritter, "American Political Rhetoric and the Jeremiad Tradition: Presidential Nomination Acceptance Addresses, 1960-1976," *Central States Speech Journal* 31 (1980): 158-164.
52. Clinton, "Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991," ¶ 22.
53. Leslie Phillips, "Presenting Candidate Clinton via Video," *USA Today* October 3, 1991, 3A.
54. Clinton, "Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991," ¶ 24.
55. Clinton, "Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991," ¶ 27.
56. Clinton, "Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991," ¶ 28.
57. Clinton, "Announcement Speech, October 3, 1991," ¶ 28, 31, 33, 35.
58. Bill Clinton, "Acceptance Speech to the Democratic National Convention, New York, NY, July 16, 1992," <http://www.4president.org/speeches/billclinton1992announcement.htm>. (accessed March 2, 2006), ¶ 6.
59. Margaret D. Zulick is quite explicit on this point arguing that prophetic rhetors were regarded as "divine envoys" and that the message of a prophet "consumes its owner." See Margaret D. Zulick, "The Agon of Jeremiah: On the Dialogic Invention of Prophetic Ethos," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 78 (1992), 129, 142.
60. Clinton, "Acceptance Speech, July 16, 1992," ¶ 17, 18.
61. Michael Waldman, *POTUS Speaks: Finding the Words that Defined the Clinton Presidency* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 36.
62. Clinton, "Acceptance Speech, July 16, 1992," ¶ 21.
63. Zulick's notion of the prophetic ethos relates to Clinton here in the sense that Clinton argued that his concern for the middle class was all-consuming because he had personally experienced the hardships of growing up in the "forgotten" middle class. Zulick writes at length about the suffering of the prophet which helps imbue the prophet's message with ethos and is a mark of God's choice of the individual to serve as a prophet. See Zulick, "The Agon of Jeremiah," 130, 142.
64. Kenneth Burke, *Counter-statement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 31.
65. Clinton, "Acceptance Speech, July 16, 1992," ¶ 78.
66. Clinton, "Acceptance Speech, July 16, 1992," ¶ 86.
67. Clinton, "Acceptance Speech, July 16, 1992," ¶ 88.
68. Clinton, "Acceptance Speech, July 16, 1992," ¶ 89.
69. Clinton "Acceptance Speech, July 16, 1992," ¶ 87, 90, 92, 97, 99.
70. Raymond Tatalovich and John Frendreis, "Clinton, Class, and Economic Policy," in *The Postmodern Presidency: Bill Clinton's Legacy in U.S. Politics*, ed. Steven E. Schier (Pittsburgh: University of

Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 41-59; John Hohenberg, *The Bill Clinton Story: Winning the Presidency* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1994), 208-215.

71. Clinton, "Acceptance Speech, July 16, 1992," ¶ 106-112.

72. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 1.

73. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 1.

74. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 1.

75. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 1.

76. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 1.

77. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 1.

78. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 2.

79. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 2.

80. Clinton, "Inaugural Address, January 20, 1993," 3.

81. See Waldman, *POTUS Speaks*, 36-37.

82. Nevertheless, Clinton was extraordinarily active in seeking to clarify and enhance the role of religion in American public life. Among other things he championed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993 which attempted to discourage public school officials from participating in voluntary religious activities while at school. The Supreme Court declared parts of this act unconstitutional because they argued that it outstripped the Court's authority to interpret the Fourteenth Amendment. For a discussion of this case and two contrary views of the Constitutional implications of Clinton's actions see Marci A. Hamilton, "Religion and the Law in the Clinton Era: An Anti-Madisonian Legacy," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 63 (2000): 359-389; William P. Marshall, "The Culture of Belief and the Politics of Religion," *Law and Contemporary Problems* 63 (2000): 453-465.

83. See Fred I. Greenstein, "There He Goes Again: The Alternating Political Style of Bill Clinton," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 31 (1998): 178-181; Stephen J. Wayne, "Clinton's Legacy: The Clinton Persona," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 32 (1999): 558-561.

84. Edward H. Sewell, "'The Bad Days Are Part of it': Editorial Cartoonists on Clinton's First Year," in *The Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues, and Communication Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Denton & Rachel L. Holloway (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 77-102.

85. Denise M. Bostdorff, "Clinton's Character Issue Management Style: Caution, Conciliation, and Conflict Avoidance in the Case of Gays in the Military," in *The Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues, and Communication Strategies*, ed. Robert E. Denton & Rachel L. Holloway (Westport: Praeger, 1996), 190, 194. See also Wayne, "Clinton's Legacy," 559.

86. Bostdorff, "Clinton's Character Issue Management Style," 192.

87. "Press Briefing by Press Secretary Mike McCurry, January 19, 1995," Press Briefings Master Set, Press Briefings January 1995, Box 4 Folder 7 William J. Clinton Presidential Library.

88. Waldman, *POTUS Speaks*, 78.

89. Bill Clinton, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 24, 1995," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1995—Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1995* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), 76.
90. Clinton, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress, January 24, 1995," 76.
91. Clinton, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress, January 24, 1995," 76.
92. Clinton, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress, January 24, 1995," 77.
93. Bill Clinton, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, January 23, 1996," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1996—Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1996* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), 79.
94. Martin Carcasson, "Ending Welfare as We Know It: President Clinton and the Rhetorical Transformation of the Anti-Welfare Culture," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 9 (2006): 657-664. While her focus is upon the rhetorical depiction of welfare recipients during Congressional proceedings on welfare reform, Lisa M. Gring-Pemle also acknowledges Clinton's willingness to rhetorically engage welfare reform as a political centrist. See Lisa M. Gring-Pemle, "'Are We Going to Now Govern by Anecdote?': Rhetorical Constructions of Welfare Recipients in Congressional Hearings, Debates, and Legislation, 1992-1996," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 87 (2001): 341-365.
95. Waldman, *POTUS Speaks*, 78.
96. The Gallup Organization, "Clinton Job Approval Unusually High: Historically, Most Presidents Receive a 'Boost' in Job Approval in Last Month in Office, December 19, 2000," <http://brain.gallup.com/content/default.aspx?ci=2191> (accessed October 11, 2007).
97. Bill Clinton, "Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the State of the Union, February 4, 1997," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: William J. Clinton 1997—Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1997* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1998), 116.
98. Dunbar, "The Presence of God," 218.
99. See Denise M. Bostdorff, "George W. Bush's post-September 11 Rhetoric of Covenant Renewal: Upholding the Faith of the Greatest Generation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 89 (2003): 294; Emory Elliott, *Power and the Pulpit in Puritan New England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 54.
100. Procter and Ritter, "Inaugurating the Clinton Presidency," 1-16; Smith, "The Jeremiadic Logic," 73-100.
101. This simple, yet accurate, statement of the jeremiad form is found in David Howard-Pitney, *The African-American Jeremiad: Appeals for Justice in America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 7. This description of the form is accepted by Kurt Ritter and David Henry, *Ronald Reagan: The Great Communicator* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 38 and Smith, "The Jeremiadic Logic," 73-100.

**CHAPTER VII**

**ENACTING TRANSFORMATION: GEORGE W. BUSH AND THE**

**PAULINE CONVERSION NARRATIVE\***

You know, I had a drinking problem. Right now I should be in a bar in Texas, not the Oval Office. There is only one reason that I am in the Oval Office and not in a bar. I found faith. I found God. I am here because of the power of prayer.

George W. Bush<sup>1</sup>

In the summer of 1985 George W. Bush took one of the most personally significant and later widely reported walks of his life at Walker's Point near Kennebunkport, Maine. The thirty-nine-year-old had suffered a string of business failures in Texas, was known as the "black sheep" of his auspicious family, and was beset by a less-than-flattering reputation as an occasionally irresponsible drinker. In short, Bush seemed like anything but presidential material. The eldest son of the Vice President cut a far-less-imposing figure than either his powerful father or his walking companion that day—the Reverend Billy Graham. Graham had joined the Bush family at their vacation home that weekend at the behest of the elder George Bush. Whether the invitation was prompted by a desire to have a private family audience with perhaps the world's greatest living evangelist or simply an opportunity to catch up with an old friend; Graham's conversation with the family soon turned into a question and answer session covering a host of spiritual topics.

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\*Portions reprinted from "Enacting Transformation: George W. Bush and the Pauline Conversion Narrative in A Charge to Keep," by David C. Bailey, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 11, 215-241, Copyright [2008] by Michigan State University.

Although George W. Bush maintains to this day that he remembers little of what Graham said during this encounter, it apparently stirred a spiritual curiosity within him. As they talked privately on the beach the next day, Graham reportedly asked Bush, “Are you right with God?” to which he responded, “No, but I want to be.”<sup>2</sup> While no complete record of their encounter remains, Bush would later define it as a spiritual turning point in his life. In his 1999 autobiography *A Charge to Keep* Bush explained that Graham had “planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year. . . . It was the beginning of a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ.”<sup>3</sup>

Although Bush’s encounter with Graham was personally significant, it also echoed a previous experience with another religious figure—one far less renowned than Graham. In April of 1984, evangelist Arthur Blessitt came to Bush’s hometown of Midland, Texas to hold a six-day revival called “Decision ’84.” Since 1969, Blessitt had become known as a sincere but somewhat eccentric evangelical figure. One of the trademarks of Blessitt’s evangelistic crusades was his habit of carrying a twelve-foot wooden cross from meeting to meeting.<sup>4</sup> Blessitt’s Midland crusade drew thousands to the city’s Chaparral Center, including several prominent businessmen from Midland’s struggling oil industry. One of these, Jim Sale, had been instrumental in arranging for Blessitt to come to Midland. He was also a personal acquaintance of George W. Bush.

During the crusade, Bush telephoned Sale to ask if a private meeting between the pair and Blessitt could be arranged. Blessitt quickly agreed. Bush, Sale, and Blessitt met together on Tuesday, April 3, 1984 at a restaurant in Midland’s Holiday Inn. Bush got to the point almost immediately telling Blessitt that “I want to talk to you about how to know Jesus Christ and how to follow Him.”<sup>5</sup> Bush’s directness impressed Blessitt who

recalled that it was unusual for someone interested in spiritual conversion to bring up the subject themselves. Bush's query provoked the following exchange:

Blessitt: "What is your relationship with Jesus?"

Bush: "I'm not sure."

Blessitt: "Let me ask you this question. If you died this moment do you have the assurance you would go to heaven?"

Bush: "No."

Blessitt: "Then let me explain to you how you can have that assurance and know for sure that you are saved."

Bush: "I'd like that."<sup>6</sup>

After several minutes of presenting the Christian gospel with copious biblical references from the New Testament (mostly from Paul's epistle to the Romans), Blessitt led Bush in what is known in evangelical circles as the "sinner's prayer" of repentance and salvation.

Dear God, I believe in You, and I need You in my life. Have mercy on me a sinner. Lord Jesus, as best as I know how, I want to follow You. Cleanse me from my sins, and come into my life as my Savior and Lord. I believe You lived without sin, died on the cross for my sins, and arose again on the third day and have now ascended unto the Father. I love you, Lord; take control of my life. . . . I accept the Lord Jesus Christ as my Savior and desire to be a true believer in and follower of Jesus. Thank You, God, for hearing my prayer. In Jesus' name I pray.<sup>7</sup>

While such prayers are nowhere formally codified as a sacrament of the Christian faith, evangelicals see them as tantamount to a life-changing spiritual rebirth which marks the beginning of a new existence for the convert. Arthur Blessitt certainly thought this was so in Bush's case. That night he recorded in his journal: "A good and powerful day. Led Vice President Bush's son to Jesus today. George Bush Jr.! This is great! Glory to God."<sup>8</sup>

Unlike his subsequent walk with Graham, Bush's conversion encounter with Arthur Blessitt was far-less-publicized in the ensuing years. Indeed, Graham was prominently featured in *A Charge to Keep* while Blessitt was not mentioned at all. In and of itself such an observation may seem insignificant. Yet when examined within a larger



rhetorical framework, the omission of the Blessitt narrative, the amplification of Graham's role in Bush's spiritual life, and the emphasis upon the results of his personal transformation all indicate that the telling of Bush's personal conversion story was marked by a series of strategic rhetorical choices to frame it within the parameters of a compelling religious rhetorical form—the Pauline conversion narrative.

This chapter is neither an exploration of the spiritual life of George W. Bush nor a partisan polemic about the sincerity of his Christian faith. Rather, it is concerned with how the 2000 Bush campaign simultaneously highlighted certain elements of Bush's conversion narrative while minimizing others such that Bush's conversion account conformed more closely to the Pauline conversion narrative. Naturally, this claim leads one to ask: Why would a presidential candidate (and his campaign) seek and desire narrative conformity to the conversion account of a first century Jew who eventually became one of Christianity's most influential figures? As this analysis will demonstrate, the answer to this question lies with the notion that rhetorical forms—recognizable recurring patterns of discourse—are an essential tool for presidential candidates who seek what Aristotle called “the available means of persuasion.”<sup>9</sup> Such a claim should not be interpreted as a positive or negative judgment of the sincerity of Bush's faith—but merely a call to explore the suasory components of his personal conversion story in the 2000 campaign.

In the case of George W. Bush, I argue that his adaptation of the Pauline conversion narrative to tell his own conversion story provided the Bush campaign with a compelling explanation for his admitted indiscretions with alcohol, and even more importantly served as narrative evidence of a divine commission upon his life which

would (according to his campaign rhetoric) ultimately culminate in his election to the presidency. Bush's use and adaptation of his narrative to the Pauline form is most clearly seen in a sermon he preached to the congregation of the Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas in March of 1999 entitled *Faith Can Change Lives* and was even more fully developed in his campaign autobiography *A Charge to Keep*. Bush's personal salvation narrative derived its suasive value from its recasting in the form of the Pauline conversion narrative—a widely-recognized religious rhetorical form used by contemporary and historical rhetors to relate life-changing transformations. In this sense, the Pauline form is a shibboleth of personal transformation.

To conduct this analysis it is necessary to begin by discussing the cultural prevalence and features of the Pauline conversion narrative as a common religious rhetorical form. Next, I will discuss how the Bush campaign refined the candidate's conversion narrative such that it more closely resembled the Pauline conversion form. Carefully exploring this adaptation to the form will show how Bush's reconstructed Pauline-style narrative proved more useful than the narrative of his own actual conversion experience in explaining Bush's former fondness for alcohol and especially in publicly commissioning him to assume the presidential office. Finally, the rhetorical and political implications of the Bush campaign's use of this form will be examined.

### **Cultural Prevalence and Features of the Pauline Conversion Narrative**

In his classic work *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, psychologist and philosopher William James writes that conversion is a “process, gradual or sudden,” whereby an internally-conflicted self “becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities.”<sup>10</sup> James'

description of the divided self is a poignant one. One self is described as an id-like figure seeking only its own pleasure while its counterpart is of stouter moral fiber. Each self is determined to master the other: the lower self desires to run amok while the higher self seeks to suppress the baser impulses of its counterpart which (in conversion) it eventually does by taking a “firmer hold upon religious realities.” Such descriptions resonate throughout human experience from religion to psychology. Indeed, such notions of personal conversion are neither new nor exclusive to evangelical Christianity. In their respective studies of conversion and conversion narratives Arthur D. Nock and Gerald Peters each note that the concept of conversion dates back to the secular philosophical schools of ancient Greece wherein students were admonished to abandon the lower orders of existence (base passions for political power, self-promotion and the like) in favor of higher orders of consciousness (enlightenment and self-discipline via philosophy).<sup>11</sup>

In *The Republic*, Plato himself argued that the ultimate goal of education was a “turning around of the soul.”<sup>12</sup> While he could not have precisely envisioned such future developments, Plato’s notion of soul transformation and his definition of rhetoric as “a way of directing the soul by means of speech”<sup>13</sup> prefigured the evangelistic endeavors of Christian preachers such as the Apostle Paul and Augustine of Hippo. Although rarely evangelistic in orientation, ancient religions such as the Egyptian cult of Osiris and many of the so called “primitive” tribal religions studied by Emile Durkheim contained elements of personal rebirth and renewal via ritualized practices.<sup>14</sup> Indeed, as Durkheim illustrates, such conversions were as much communal as individual since one could not even be considered a full adult member of the society in question without having had such an experience.<sup>15</sup>

Although conversion was an important idea in the ancient, pre-Christian world, its most prolific influence occurred after it was recast in the Pauline form by subsequent generations of Christian rhetors. As Peter A. Dorsey explains, “Augustine and other early Christians found a scriptural model for conversion in the life and writings of St. Paul, who regarded the receiving of the Spirit of the risen Lord as a central event in the life of a Christian.”<sup>16</sup> Because of these rhetors, the Pauline conversion form exists today as a commonly recurring pattern of religious discourse which has permeated everything from the autobiography and novels of Western literature,<sup>17</sup> to American frontier literature and mythology,<sup>18</sup> to the rhetoric of racial reconciliation in the American south.<sup>19</sup> In order to appreciate the cultural prevalence of this durable form, one must distinguish the phases of the narrative form, the situational factors implicit within the form, and the rhetor’s description of the effects of his or her conversion. It is equally important to recall at the outset that such conversion narratives are not the actual conversions themselves, but the rhetor’s post-hoc account of the event.

The New Testament book of Acts contains three accounts of the Apostle Paul’s conversion to Christianity, all of which share a common narrative structure. Saul of Tarsus was a devout Jew and staunch enemy of the first century Christian church. Eager to quash what he saw as a dangerous upstart sect of Judaism, Saul went from city to city arresting any Christians he could find. On his way to Damascus, the writer of Acts tells us, he encountered a bright light and heard the voice of Jesus asking: “Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). All of three accounts agree that he was struck blind and was led into Damascus where he eventually regained his sight and ultimately, after several years of wandering and meditation,<sup>20</sup> took on a new life mission. After this encounter he

began to refer to himself as “Paul” (the name he used as a Roman citizen prior to his conversion) and became a Christian missionary to the gentiles. Religious studies scholar Gerald Peters argues that the name change to “Paul” was significant and represented “not only the rebirth of a historical figure but the incarnation of a more permanent, public self. . . .”<sup>21</sup> Whether his name change was a milestone of newly found faith or simply a useful tool for carrying his gospel message across the Roman world of the first century, Paul’s dramatic conversion account eventually became “embedded in Christian consciousness”<sup>22</sup> as what Kenneth Burke would call a “representative anecdote” of Christian conversions.<sup>23</sup>

As Paul’s story was told and retold it was also reconfigured to meet the rhetorical needs of the Christian converts who used it to frame their own conversion stories and often those of their audiences. In such rhetorical situations the conversion narrative is often referred to as a “testimony” or spiritual autobiography. The most notable change from the testimonial form of the Pauline narrative and the actual Pauline account in Acts is that the protagonist is no longer a member in good standing of an older, more established religious tradition as Paul had been prior to his conversion. As the narrative unfolded across the centuries and became the archetypical conversion story, the protagonist became a vile sinner whose life was in desperate need of redemption. Along with the privileged place it has enjoyed in Christian tradition down through the centuries, the Pauline form of a sinful or religiously apathetic (according to James) soul being confronted by divine conviction of sin and reforming his or her life accordingly, has become a standard form in Christian and secular rhetoric. The imprint of this form is evident in the way its transgression, transformation, commissioning narrative unfolds.

Although not identical,<sup>24</sup> the conversion narratives of Christian luminaries St. Augustine of Hippo and Protestant reformer Martin Luther bear the imprint of the Pauline form and illustrate the various phases of the narrative. The Pauline conversion narrative was certainly a familiar story to Augustine whose spiritual father, Ambrose of Milan, encouraged him to study assiduously the life and teachings of the first century apostle. In *Confessions* Augustine writes of the guilt-ridden angst he felt just prior to his conversion experience in a Milan garden in 386 C.E.: “You, Lord, put pressure on me in my hidden depths with a severe mercy wielding the double whip of fear and shame.”<sup>25</sup> Even the most cursory reading of *Confessions* reveals Augustine’s profound sense of both guilt and shame over his perceived sins—which he took great pains to describe in detail from his earliest childhood on through his adult life—even after his conversion.

Ernest Bormann describes this first phase as the “protagonist’s awareness of not living as the gospel requires”<sup>26</sup> while William James similarly defines it as the potential convert’s newly-found awareness of “the present incompleteness or wrongness, the ‘sin’ which he is eager to escape from.”<sup>27</sup> Establishment of this phase is essential to maintain fidelity to the Pauline account of open hostility toward God. The speaker says, in effect, that he or she was utterly lost in sin and rebellion—an object of pity and wretched depravity. Such features are obvious in the account of seventeenth century Puritan minister Thomas Shepard who painstakingly described his fondness for “lewd company...lust & pride & gaming & bowling & drinking” prior to his salvation experience.<sup>28</sup> Such Augustinian-style confession was apparently required to illustrate the degree and depth of the transformation which had occurred.

Recent evidence suggests that contemporary political figures who use the Pauline form tend to mollify the transgression phase. For instance David McLennan writes that the conversion narrative of former Nixon aid and Watergate conspirator Charles Colson softened the description of his transgressions a bit by using the language of apologia. McLennan finds that Colson's "disease" metaphor to describe his sins enabled him, to some degree, to avoid "accepting personal responsibility for the problems of the Nixon administration . . . ." <sup>29</sup> While Colson did publicly confess his wrongdoings in his 1976 autobiography *Born Again*, McLennan's finding is important to keep in mind since it suggests that the transgression phases of contemporary political Pauline conversion accounts often seek to deflect at least some guilt away from the protagonist. Once the rhetor has established his or her sinfulness, the narrative reflects God's transformative revelation to the rhetor via the transformation phase.

As is true of other narratives styled after the Pauline form, Augustine's deep guilt and shame in the transgression phase contrasts starkly against the glorious exultation of his transformation:

Suddenly it had become sweet to me to be without the sweets of folly. What I once feared to lose was now a delight to dismiss. You turned them out and entered their place, pleasanter than any pleasure but not to flesh and blood, brighter than all light yet more inward than any secret recess . . . Already my mind was free of 'the biting cares' of place-seeking, of desire for gain, of wallowing in self-indulgence, of scratching the itch of lust. And I was now talking with you, Lord my God, my radiance, my wealth, and my salvation. <sup>30</sup>

The transformation phase is the heart of the Pauline conversion narrative. In the transformation phase, the rhetor revels in his or her changed condition. Bormann explains the typical content of this phase of the narrative: "A man's life divided in twain: the first part was rife with worldliness and sin: the second showed forth the beauty of a changed

life.”<sup>31</sup> William James—whose *The Varieties of Religious Experience* was informed by the two hundred personal conversion narratives he collected for the project—describes the transformation and its ultimate results as:

an altogether new level of spiritual vitality, a relatively heroic level, in which impossible things have become possible, and new energies and endurances are shown. The personality is changed, the man is born anew, whether or not his psychological idiosyncrasies are what give the particular shape to his meta-morphosis. ‘Sanctification’ is the technical name of this result. . . .<sup>32</sup>

This second phase of the Pauline form flows quite naturally into the third—the transformed convert now speaks of what they perceive as a commission to serve by doing God’s work. As if to mark the profound change, the protagonist describes the significant changes which occurred in his or her life after conversion. For Augustine and Luther the commissioning phase involved leaving their chosen professions as a professor of rhetoric and an aspiring lawyer respectively. For Paul, one component of this change involved seeing non-Jews as the focus of his missionary efforts on behalf of his new found faith. The third account in Acts records that Jesus commissioned Paul, “to open their [Gentile] eyes and turn them from darkness to light” (Acts 26:18). At its core, the commissioning phase involves the protagonist’s description of purpose and renewed mission that he or she has accepted as a result of the conversion experience.

In some variations, this phase of the narrative either shifts the focus of the narrative in such a way as to encourage the hearers to proselytize others<sup>33</sup> or lists the personal and spiritual benefits received post-conversion.<sup>34</sup> While these variations are worthy of study, they appear somewhat peripheral to the central idea of this phase in the original Pauline story—Paul’s conversion experience was cited as evidence of a divine commission which had been placed upon his life. Religious studies scholar Charles W.



Hedrick has argued that two of the three Pauline conversion accounts in the book of Acts (Acts 22: 4-21 & 26:12-18) can be properly identified as “call/commissioning narratives” because of their emphasis upon how Paul’s conversion was a divine appointment for his future evangelical endeavors.<sup>35</sup> As such, the convert’s new commission completes the process of conversion and enables him or her to stand before an audience (often of fellow believers) as a transformed individual on a divine mission.

While perhaps less poetic, Martin Luther’s account of conversion is strikingly similar to the Pauline and Augustinian versions. Luther is said to have converted in 1505 C.E. after being caught in a fearsome thunderstorm on his way to Erfurt. In fear and despair he cried out to St. Anna, “I will become a monk.”<sup>36</sup> Perhaps because this conversion was one to monastic asceticism rather than what Luther would later perceive as ‘true religion,’ or because of his miserable sojourn in monastic life during the subsequent years, Luther’s account does not report the same liberation and exultation immediately upon his conversion as did Augustine. Nevertheless, Luther writes of his famous “tower experience” which occurred years later (circa 1519) while studying the book of *Romans* as a preacher and professor of theology at the University of Wittenberg. Luther’s struggle with the Pauline text convinced him that salvation was ultimately the product of divine grace rather than human effort—that one simply had to accept God’s provision for salvation. For Luther, this realization was an experience wherein the message of the Christian gospel crystallized into a meaningful, life-changing encounter: “I felt myself straightway born afresh and to have entered through open gates into paradise itself.”<sup>37</sup> Like Augustine before him, Luther believed that his new found revelation had empowered and commissioned him with a sense of higher purpose.

Perhaps it is not coincidental that Luther began his program of systematically deconstructing Catholic hierarchy and theology after this experience.

Aside from the transgression, transformation, and commissioning phases that are typical of the narrative, the Pauline, Augustinian, and Lutheran accounts all illustrate the presence of several situational factors typically described by the rhetor as he or she recounts the conversion experience. First, such conversions often stem from a deep existential crisis of the soul. Paul (according to Luke's account in *Acts*) was confronted by Christ himself with the sinfulness of what he later described in *Galatians* as his "persecution" of the Christian church—a realization which caused him to proclaim himself "the worst of sinners."<sup>38</sup> Augustine was confronted by the futility of pursuing human pleasures and worldly success—objectives toward which his entire life to that point had been oriented. Luther's existential crisis (according to his account of the "tower experience") came from his recognition of the futility of achieving salvation by human means—it was God who saved rather than man.<sup>39</sup> Although fear and shame (what Augustine called God's "severe mercy") usually accompany conversion experiences, conversions (religious or secular) always come at a moment of crisis which forces the protagonist to make an important choice. The subject is brought to a moment of personal spiritual decision wherein fear of judgment, shame over past sins, or some similar psychological motivation emanating from what James calls the "divided self" crystallizes the need for a profound change.

Bormann's analysis of the sermons before and after the Great Awakening in North America demonstrates that expressions of fear, shame and personal crisis were practically ubiquitous in conversion accounts from groups as theologically diverse as the

Calvinistic Puritans to the more evangelically-minded Baptist and Methodist congregations.<sup>40</sup> For instance, seventeenth century minister Thomas Shepard recalled his moment of crisis after finding himself lying in a cornfield hungover from the previous evening's carousing. Shepard reported that God "troubled my soul for this and other my sins, which then I had cause and leisure to think of. Now when I was worst, He began to be best unto me, and made me resolve to set upon a course of daily meditation about the evil of my sin . . . ."<sup>41</sup> It appears that, in its traditional form, a crisis was required to initiate the conversion experience and add dramatic richness to the narrative.

A second important situational factor associated with the telling of the Pauline conversion narrative is the suddenness of the experience. Patricia Caldwell relates the account of Puritan woman Elizabeth White who, although ostensibly religious, reported having a genuine conversion encounter while attending a sermon in 1657 wherein the Lord "broke my false confidence, and swept away my refuge of lies."<sup>42</sup> White's account is reflective of the sudden conviction which converts often describe in the initial transgression phase of the narrative. The theme of suddenness is also displayed in the conversion narrative of Charles Colson who vividly recounted the initial stirrings of the conversion impulse in his own life as a friend read a passage from C.S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity*. Colson reported the moment in his 1976 autobiography tellingly entitled *Born Again*: "I could feel a flush coming into my face. . . . Suddenly I felt naked and unclean, my bravado and defenses gone. I was exposed, unprotected, for Lewis's words were describing me. . . ."<sup>43</sup> However, it is important to realize that religious or secular conversions—as lived by the convert—are not always marked by the suddenness suggested in narratives such as White's and Colson's.<sup>44</sup> When retold; however, they often

morph into a Pauline form wherein the convert, like Paul, describes the moment of conversion as “seeing the light” or a type of “Damascus road experience.” What may be lived in slow motion—complete with moments of rejection of the divine call and willful procrastination—is narrativized with emphasis upon suddenness.

A third situational factor often present in conversion accounts of the Pauline type is the recollection of the specific time and place at which the transformation occurred. The initial Pauline accounts in Acts specifically situate his conversion narrative on the Damascus road. A lowly cornfield is the site of Thomas Shepard’s conversion while Charles Colson’s initial conversion experience took place in his car and was dramatically reinforced later in his prison cell. While one could make the case that such humble scenes may reinforce the notion that the protagonist has “hit rock bottom,” it seems more plausible to suggest that the specificity with reference to time and place serves to lend credibility to the story.

The phases (transgression, transformation, commissioning) and the situational factors (existential crisis, suddenness, specific time and place) of the Pauline conversion narrative coalesce into a compelling story of personal transformation at the deepest level. Such stories serve an important communal function in a Durkheimian sense because persons who tell such stories are typically seen as fellow believers and are accepted into the community of faith. As rhetorical scholar Brian R. McGee notes, “The convert is immediately received by fellow Christians as a new person now separated from her or his past transgressions.”<sup>45</sup> Thus, a convert who tells his or her story literally enacts his or her spiritual transformation before the audience. In modern American religious life where forty-six percent of the population claims to have been “born again,”<sup>46</sup> the Pauline

conversion form is perhaps the most unmistakable religious shibboleth in existence. As such, we must determine whether this form can perform a similar function in modern American politics.

While the communication literature includes many studies of religious language in political discourse, far fewer studies focus upon conversion narratives in such discourse. Peter M. Kellett demonstrates that various approaches to communication theory may be a useful way of studying the interpersonal components of conversion phenomena.<sup>47</sup> Yet, Kellett provides no extended examples to clarify the critical utility of these theoretical models. Sociologist Richard Harvey Brown explains that “logics of discovery” as related in classic works of science from luminaries such as Descartes, Copernicus, and Rheticus are related in the form of conversion narratives.<sup>48</sup> Based upon the frequency with which such narratives occur in science, Brown proposes that conversion narratives be considered “as a literary/scientific genre.”<sup>49</sup>

While they do not specify the conversion form used as Pauline, Charles Griffin and David B. McLennan both study the conversion form used by Charles Colson in *Born Again*—suggesting that such a form does play a prominent role in contemporary political rhetoric. Brian R. McGee’s study of Louisiana politician and former Ku Klux Klansmen David Duke’s 1991 gubernatorial campaign rhetoric also reveals that the conversion form can (and does) influence political messages. Griffin finds that the conversion form “contributes directly” to Colson’s *Born Again*’s “function as discourse.”<sup>50</sup> Specifically, Griffin’s study reveals how rhetors using conversion narratives “can use the agency of narrative form to construct coherent and plausible myths of self around the self-insights they have obtained through conversion.”<sup>51</sup> Although Griffin offers a plausible explanation

of the suasory value that the conversion narrative added to Colson's message, he does little to explain why or how the conversion form adds to the appeal of Colson's account. McLennan's account is much firmer in this regard, pointing out that conversion was a standard (and often compelling) rhetorical motif in post-Watergate and post-Vietnam America. However, even McLennan's study would have benefited from a more direct application to presidential rhetoric if it was to help us understand the full influence of the form in American political rhetoric. In this sense, this exploration of George W. Bush's conversion narrative as in the 2000 presidential campaign seeks to extend upon the findings of Griffin and McLennan by both further specifying the suasory nature of Pauline conversion narratives as typically used in situations where a political rhetor seeks to convey a sense of personal transformation. The present chapter also reveals the form's rhetorical utility in the context of presidential campaign discourse.

Likewise, McGee's study of David Duke's use of conversion form presents useful findings which call for further exploration. While McGee convincingly demonstrates that Duke used the conversion form to considerably shore up his damaged ethos, one wonders how McGee's finding might be confirmed or challenged by exploration of a politician whose ethos did not require such radical reconstruction. Thus, each of these useful studies suggest that religious rhetorical form certainly influences the content of a message. Yet, additional clarification of the specific type of form is required along with further analysis of how and why such religious rhetorical forms may contribute to the persuasiveness of a presidential candidate's message.

### Conforming Bush's Conversion Narrative to the Pauline Form

If Mario Cuomo was correct that political candidates campaign in poetry but govern in prose, then the 2000 presidential candidacy of George W. Bush suggests that presidential candidates try to synchronize their poetic campaign narratives with those alive in the public consciousness even if they do not match exactly. From the start of his presidential run, Bush wanted the public to know that he intended his presidency to be defined by a “higher purpose.” Bush laid the rhetorical groundwork of this “higher purpose” in two noteworthy texts—his sermon to the Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas on March 6, 1999 and his campaign autobiography entitled *A Charge to Keep*—the lion's share of which was ghostwritten by his long-time confidant, speechwriter, and communications director Karen Hughes. Although Bush did not officially announce his candidacy until June of that year, Bush and his team had been considering the possibility at least since his reelection as Texas Governor in 1998.

Bush biographer Stephen Mansfield relates the now famous story of Bush's reaction to the Texas gubernatorial inaugural sermon of Pastor Mark Craig. Craig's sermon related the biblical story of Moses' call from God to lead Israel out of Egypt; however, the application of the text was as political as spiritual with Craig proclaiming that modern America (presumably because of Clinton's Lewinsky scandal) was “starved for leaders who have ethical and moral courage.”<sup>52</sup> Mansfield writes that Bush began to believe that Pastor Craig's message had been meant for him: “He felt a ‘call,’ a sense that God was directing him to run for president.”<sup>53</sup> This interpretation was seemingly confirmed by Bush's mother—Barbara Pierce Bush—who after the service announced to her oldest son with her characteristic bluntness that Reverend Craig “was talking to

you.”<sup>54</sup> Not long after his second gubernatorial inauguration Bush began meeting with evangelical Christian pastors and leaders confessing to them that “I feel like God wants me to run for president.”<sup>55</sup>

Whether the impetus for Bush’s presidential aspirations were personal or divine, his widely-reported “misadventures” and fondness for alcohol up until his fortieth birthday presented a problem. He had even admitted publicly that this behavior had a negative impact upon his marriage and family. How could Bush claim that he sought the White House because of a divine calling to restore integrity to the office when certain elements of his past suggested that he himself may have had lapses in his own integrity? An answer to this rhetorical and political problem was to be found in the Pauline conversion narrative—a rhetorical staple of Christianity and a form designed specifically to highlight the personal and spiritual transformation of one who had encountered God.

As he positioned himself to run for president, Bush began meeting with evangelical leaders such as Dr. Richard Land of the Southern Baptist Convention, Bishop T.D. Jakes pastor of The Potter’s House in Dallas, Texas, Dr. Tony Evans pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Fellowship Church in Dallas, and evangelist and Christian talk show host James Robison who, in many ways, proved to be Bush’s most important entree into these religious circles. Although Bush struck Robison as a “party boy” when the two first met during George H.W. Bush’s reelection campaign in 1992, the two had forged a friendship as a result of a meeting they had in Austin in 1998.<sup>56</sup> At this meeting Bush was surprisingly candid with the evangelist: “I had a drinking problem. I won’t say I was an alcoholic, but it affected my relationships, even with my kids. It could have destroyed me. But I’ve given my life to Christ.”<sup>57</sup> While expressing his personal reluctance to run



for president, Bush told Robison that “I feel God wants me to do this, and I must do it.”<sup>58</sup>

At the close of this meeting Robison pledged to introduce Bush to other high profile Christian leaders and even arranged a series of prayer meetings for him in the governor’s mansion in Austin.<sup>59</sup> Having used allusions to his conversion story to gain access to the highest circles of evangelical Protestant leaders, George W. Bush would soon go public with the shibboleth.

Though he attended church as a boy with his family at Midland’s First Presbyterian Church and later at St. Martin’s Episcopal Church in Houston (where he served as an altar boy for a time), Bush could never point to a single “transforming moment” of “instantaneous spiritual awakening” prior to the ones which occurred in his late thirties.<sup>60</sup> Bush later said that faith always seemed to be there in the sense of “stirrings of a faith that would be years in the shaping.”<sup>61</sup> Even in his late thirties when these “stirrings” apparently began to mature into a higher spiritual sensibility, Bush’s spiritual growth appears to have come in fits and starts. As biographer Paul Kengor explains Bush’s actual conversion “was no Saul-like conversion . . .” at all.<sup>62</sup> In 1984 Bush prayed the “sinner’s prayer” with evangelist Arthur Blessitt. A year later he took the famous walk on the beach with Billy Graham. A year after that Bush made the decision to give up drinking. Thus, while the years 1984-1986 were certainly pivotal in his spiritual life, his actual personal experience could scarcely be said to have conformed to the Pauline form. Yet, one gets the impression from Bush’s sermon to Houston’s Second Baptist Church and from his campaign biography *A Charge to Keep* that his conversion was much more sudden and his transformation less gradual than it had actually been—important facets of the Pauline conversion narrative.

On March 6, 1999, George W. Bush delivered a sermon entitled “Faith Can Change Lives” before the congregation of the Second Baptist Church in Houston, Texas. While it is hardly unusual for sitting governors or other elected officials to speak at religious gatherings, Bush seemed to be casting a vision that went well beyond the borders of Texas. Much of the speech was devoted to expounding Bush’s philosophy of “compassionate conservatism,” Bush began the sermon (as he had in his conversation with James Robison in 1998) with an extremely personal statement:

You and I are here because we believe that faith changes lives. . . . I know firsthand because faith changed mine. I grew up in the church, but I didn’t always walk the walk. There came a point in my life when I felt empty. And so, by chance, or maybe it wasn’t chance, I got to spend a weekend with the great Billy Graham, and as a result of our conversations and his inspiration, I searched my heart and recommitted my life to Jesus Christ. My relationship with God through Christ has given me meaning and direction.<sup>63</sup>

Within this short paragraph, one finds each phase of the Pauline conversion narrative (transgression, transformation, commissioning) and each of the situational factors typically described within such narratives (existential crisis, suddenness, specific time and place).

As is typical in the Pauline conversion narrative, the protagonist begins with an acknowledgement of his or her transgressions prior to conversion. Although Bush did not list his prior sins, he acknowledged that he “didn’t always walk the walk.” This was an important and necessary admission to make since there had already been much speculation in mainstream media outlets about Bush’s alleged unseemly behavior in earlier years. These rumors included one fictional story about nude table dancing at a country club party and a few true accounts about minor road sign stealing peccadilloes while a student at Yale.<sup>64</sup> Although evidence of Bush’s 1976 citation from driving under

the influence of alcohol would not come to light for another year and a half, news stories speculated about potential alcoholism and marijuana and cocaine use during his years at Yale and into his thirties.<sup>65</sup> While no credible evidence to support such charges had emerged by March of 1999, it was clear to the Bush campaign that a preemptive response was needed to solidify Bush's image before news of his 1976 DUI or any other damaging information could come out. The Pauline conversion narrative would enable Bush to claim that any transgressions from his life before conversion could simply be relegated to the time that he was not yet "walking the walk."

As Christians often say "sin has consequences," and one of the consequences of not "walking the walk" was that Bush "felt empty." This allusion to the existential crisis of the soul which is a staple of conversion narratives seems quite benign when considered against the existential crisis of a figure such as Augustine. Yet, the statement conformed to the Pauline form and demonstrated to his evangelical audience that Bush had been brought to the point of spiritual crisis necessary for the transformation to occur.

Bush next related the transformation component of the Pauline conversion narrative. As the core of the Pauline form, the transformation phase relates the moment when the transformation occurred. In Bush's case, the transformation occurred at a specific place and time and with a specific person taking on the role of Bush's spiritual mentor—no less than "the great Billy Graham." As William James notes, these details infuse the narrative with credibility.<sup>66</sup> Bush's reference to his conversion having taken place over the course of a weekend with Graham also conveys a sense of suddenness about the experience because of how this particular weekend with this particular figure had such a profound influence upon his life.

Bush added further legitimacy to his conversion by citing Graham as his spiritual mentor in both this sermon and in *A Charge to Keep*. While Bush's description of Graham's role in his conversion will be explored in more detail in a few pages, for now it is important to note that although Arthur Blessitt prayed with Bush a year before his encounter with Graham, it is Graham who is identified as having been responsible for his conversion. Bush's personal testimony on this Sunday morning also included the commissioning phase of the Pauline conversion narrative—his assertion that faith provided his life with “meaning and direction.” While Bush dealt with commissioning more peripherally than he would later in *A Charge to Keep*, it is obvious that he wanted the audience of Christian brothers and sisters to whom he was speaking to become convinced that he was one of them. Thus, Bush's use of the Pauline conversion narrative was designed to produce what Kenneth Burke would call a sense of “identification and consubstantiality” via the use of rhetorical form.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, one notices that Bush's actual experience of religious conversion has been narrativized—certain aspects of his experience amplified while others have been omitted or altered—so that it would better fit the parameters of the Pauline form. While this assertion may be obvious from this analysis of Bush's sermon to Houston's Second Baptist Church, Bush's narrativization or transformation of his narrative into the Pauline form will become even more obvious through an analysis of his 1999 campaign autobiography *A Charge to Keep*.

The release of a campaign autobiography is hardly an unprecedented move in American politics. In fact nearly every major presidential candidate from both parties had published a new book at the outset of the 2000 campaign. Yet, Bush's autobiography had a distinctively religious tone and substance due to its reliance upon the Pauline

conversion rhetorical form. The book's title itself *A Charge to Keep* was taken from evangelist Charles Wesley's 1762 hymn "A Charge to Keep I Have." A favorite in Methodist congregations, Bush had professed during his first term as Governor of Texas that he too admired the hymn and was "particularly impressed" with its second verse: "To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill; O may it all my powers engage to do my Master's will."<sup>68</sup> He was so impressed by the message that he had a painting of the same title by Texas artist W.H.D. Koerner hung prominently in his Austin office and later in the Oval Office. The painting features a road-weary horseman riding up a steep rocky trail. It became a richly-symbolic talisman for the Bush administration during his governorship and presidency. Shortly after the painting was first loaned to him in 1995, Bush sent a memorandum to his staff inviting them to look at the painting and ponder its significance in light of the public trust that comes with high office. At the end of the memorandum Bush added that: "This is us. What adds complete life to the painting for me is the message of Charles Wesley that we serve One greater than ourselves."<sup>69</sup> In and of itself, the message of proving faithful to a public trust may not even seem patently religious, yet when examined alongside of Bush's conversion story as told in *A Charge to Keep*, it is clear that such messages represent the commissioning phase of the Pauline conversion narrative. Indeed, the central idea of *A Charge to Keep* was that George W. Bush viewed public office as a charge or calling—one which he stood ready to undertake.

Bush's *A Charge to Keep* was reflective of the Pauline conversion form in its employment of the phases of the narrative (transgression, transformation, commissioning), the situational factors which often accompany it (existential crisis, suddenness, specific time and place), and the transformative results of the experience.

When *A Charge to Keep* was released in November of 1999 the 2000 presidential campaign was already well underway and Bush was considered by most to be the Republican frontrunner despite the fact that the primary season would not get underway until January. In light of this, we may consider the autobiography to be the clearest expression of Bush's religious message in the 2000 presidential campaign.

Considering *A Charge to Keep* as a political text inspired by a religious rhetorical form, one sees that Bush's use of the Pauline conversion form was modified to befit his status as Republican frontrunner—a change since his March 1999 sermon in Houston. As such, Bush's Pauline conversion narrative as used in *A Charge to Keep* focused primarily upon the transformation and commissioning phases rather than the transgression phase. Far from seeing confession of his pre-conversion sins as a part of God's "severe mercy" in the Augustinian fashion, Bush discussed his transgressions in a rather evasive, Clintonesque manner. Bush began his story by acknowledging that he "drank too much and woke up with a hangover" during a fortieth birthday celebration weekend with friends in Colorado Springs.<sup>70</sup> By choosing to engage the subject of his drinking synechdochally through the lens of one incident—in effect making it the representative anecdote of his entire experience with alcohol—Bush enabled himself to engage all of his experiences with drinking by engaging just one. It was while jogging with this apparently nasty hangover that Bush decided to give up drinking.

Framing his decision to stop drinking in this way had the effect of minimizing any moral accountability that stemmed from his failures in this area. Here Bush briefly digressed to make the point that his friends "laugh about the image of me as a party animal, an image they think is vastly overblown."<sup>71</sup> After deftly dodging much of the

responsibility for any past sins by minimizing them and discussing only one incident, Bush was ultimately forced to confront them—though be it in a rather oblique fashion. He admitted (as he had in previous interviews) that “when I was young and irresponsible, I sometimes behaved young and irresponsibly” and that during his years as a young oil executive in Midland “There were a few big parties.”<sup>72</sup> He hastened to add that “I engaged in some of the excesses of youth of my time, things I wouldn’t have wanted my mother to know then but that she would probably laugh about now that I’ve survived them.”<sup>73</sup>

Bush spent the next several paragraphs justifying his aversion to publicly confessing specifics misdeeds from his past:

Many reporters who ask me about this do not approve of my reluctance to itemize misbehavior. They worship at the altar of public confession, demanding that candidates tell all. They want to conduct a public strip search . . . I think they forget that children are watching, including my own. I believe parents who choose to recount their misadventures run a great risk that their children will imitate them. . . . I don’t want my own daughters or any other young people to imitate anything foolish I once did or use me as an excuse for misbehavior. I believe leaders have a responsibility to send a clear message to our children. . . . Make smart and healthy choices.<sup>74</sup>

If one stopped reading *A Charge to Keep* at this point, one would be left with the impression that Bush simply sought to be an accomplished politician and skillfully conceal his indiscretions and that no actual conversion had taken place.

Aside from being premature, this type of dismissal of the Pauline conversion form would ignore three important facets of religious rhetorical form. First, as in his sermon to Second Baptist in Houston, Bush’s rhetorical aim was to convey a sense of religious transformation—which is, after all, the ultimate goal of the Pauline conversion narrative. As McLennan suggests in his analysis of the conversion narrative of Charles Colson in

*Born Again*, the presence of apologia strategy in some elements of conversion rhetoric does not abrogate the fact that the conversion form was still used.<sup>75</sup> This adaptation by Colson and Bush suggests that contemporary transgression phases are considerably lighter than their historical counterparts. Second, while the transgression phase is truncated in Bush's case, he told his story in conformity to every other facet of the Pauline conversion form. Finally, a rhetor's adaptation of a rhetorical form should not be interpreted as an abandonment of it. In their examination of Bill Clinton's use of confessional rhetoric in a series of three speeches responding to the Monica Lewinsky scandal, Ronald Lee and Matthew H. Barton found that Clinton's first two forays into the confession genre were, at best, incomplete. Nevertheless Clinton's rhetoric continued to be influenced by the form and he finally met the requirements of rhetoric of contrition in the third address:

Each successive speech embraced more fully the generic demands of religious confession. The president moved from characterizing his transgressions as mistakes to calling them sins; he moved from angrily blaming others for his troubles to asking forgiveness for his pride; and he moved from the liberal language of rights to the moral language of virtue.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, we must recognize that Bush's adaptation of the Pauline form to reflect his own squeamishness about naming the specific sins for which he was sorry hardly represents a lack of influence on the part of the Pauline conversion narrative.

Transformation is both the rhetorical heart and the ultimate goal of the Pauline conversion narrative. While Bush tiptoed around his transgressions in *A Charge to Keep*, he plunged headlong into the rhetoric of transformation. After discussing the benefits yielded by his decision to quit drinking Bush explained that "the seeds of my decision had been planted the year before, by the Reverend Billy Graham."<sup>77</sup> In order to fully



appreciate Bush's narrative of this encounter, it is necessary to quote his recollection at some length:

He [Graham] visited my family for a summer weekend in Maine. I saw him preach at the small summer church, St. Ann's by the Sea. . . . One evening my dad asked Billy to answer questions from a big group of family gathered for the weekend. He sat by the fire and talked. And what he said sparked a change in my heart. I don't remember the exact words. It was more the power of his example. The Lord was so clearly reflected in his gentle and loving demeanor. The next day we walked and talked at Walker's Point, and I knew I was in the presence of a great man. He was like a magnet; I felt drawn to seek something different. He didn't lecture or admonish; he shared warmth and concern. Billy Graham didn't make you feel guilty; he made you feel loved. Over the course of that weekend, Reverend Graham planted a mustard seed in my soul, a seed that grew over the next year. He led me to the path and I began walking.<sup>78</sup>

This account contains two important rhetorical acts which are crucial to the use of the Pauline conversion narrative in Bush's campaign discourse. First, we see evidence of all three of the important situational factors (existential crisis, suddenness, specific time and place) found within Pauline conversion narratives. Though mildly muted by his aversion to discussing specific transgressions, Bush's description still provides evidence of existential crisis—not in dramatic Pauline or Augustinian terms, but in the more urbane language of a twentieth century seeker. Graham made Bush feel loved by God—an experience which—as previously noted—can be a powerful and life changing experience in itself. Thus, Bush's existential crisis was motivated more by love rather than simple fear and shame as illustrated by the conversions of Luther and sixteenth century English reformer Thomas Bilney whose existential crises were motivated (according to their accounts) by realizations of God's love.<sup>79</sup> As a result of this revelation Bush reports that a change was “sparked” within his heart. In this passage Bush's transformation was narrated as a sudden awakening which happened during the weekend

with Graham, thus establishing fidelity to the suddenness and time and place situational factors of the Pauline conversion narrative.

In his campaign biography Bush amplified Billy Graham's role in his conversion. Indeed, Bush speaks of Graham with the sort of reverence and respect due from a student to his spiritual father. Bush's "mustard seed" metaphor bespeaks of Jesus' well known parable of the mustard seed.<sup>80</sup> In this parable Jesus explained to his followers that although miniscule in size, the mustard seed can eventually produce trees of great size. In *A Charge to Keep*, Graham was portrayed as a servant of God who faithfully planted the seed of faith in Bush's life—a seed which (according to the narrative) eventually grew to greater maturity. The striking thing about this description of Graham is not that Bush gave much credit to Graham for his conversion; it is that he gave Graham all the credit by failing to mention his encounter with evangelist Arthur Blessitt the year before. Bush's omission of Blessitt is quite curious. It seems highly unlikely that Bush would have simply forgotten Blessitt. Indeed, as Blessitt reports on his personal website, he and then candidate Bush exchanged warm pleasantries and remembrances of their 1984 visit together at a fundraiser in June of 1999—just months before the release of *A Charge to Keep*.<sup>81</sup> While his encounter with Blessitt may have been just one event in a series of events which led to Bush's ultimate conversion (as is often the case in actual conversions), it still seems odd that Bush would have omitted it given his willingness to discuss other steps in his spiritual growth such as being an altar boy, teaching Sunday school, attending community Bible study after his conversion and the like.<sup>82</sup> As such, the most plausible explanation for the omission is that it was intentional.

Why would Bush choose to omit his encounter with Blessitt from a book which so specifically refers to his spiritual development and subsequent conversion? The omission appears to have been motivated by two factors. First, in the Pauline account, the convert typically has only one moment of spiritual awakening. While in actual practice a new convert may have had several moments of important spiritual realization, the Pauline-style story is (almost without exception) told as one defining moment of spiritual transformation at one place and time. The inclusion of the Blessitt account would have simply been too great a deviation from the Pauline pattern and would therefore have made the rest of Bush's conversion story less believable. Additionally, Bush (or his ghostwriter Karen Hughes)<sup>83</sup> may have feared that telling the whole story might have reflected poorly on Bush's devotion to his newfound faith in light of his personal behavior. Although Bush fully admits to drinking for almost a full year after his 1985 conversion with Graham, the evidence of profound personal change brought about by such a conversion would have carried far less persuasive power had Bush admitted to having had two conversion experiences and continuing to drink for two years after the first.

A second reason Bush likely chose to omit the Blessitt account is that Billy Graham—who has been widely recognized as one of the world's most respected religious figures and has consistently appeared on top ten lists of the most admired people in America<sup>84</sup>—simply exudes more credibility than Arthur Blessitt. Although widely regarded as a sincere Christian evangelist, Blessitt's celebrity lacks the almost universal appeal of Graham's. While serving as a street evangelist off the Sunset Strip in the 1970s, Blessitt's style of presenting the gospel to the “down and out” drew both critics and

admirers. Besides his penchant for carrying a twelve-foot wooden cross through the streets of Los Angeles, Blessitt also operated a Christian nightclub called “His Place” and would occasionally attempt to relate to his audiences by peppering his sermons with allusions from the drug culture. He once told an audience that Jesus was an “eternal trip” and explained that if a person wants to be truly happy: “Man, you don’t have to drop downers; all you have to do is drop a little Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.”<sup>85</sup> Given the choice of claiming Billy Graham or Arthur Blessitt as a spiritual mentor, it is small wonder that Bush chose to amplify Graham’s role in his conversion account. Although noteworthy in itself, this selectivity militates toward the larger conclusion that Bush’s conversion narrative was refined according to a series of strategic rhetorical choices.

In *A Charge to Keep* Bush continued his discussion of the transformation wrought by his conversion. Bush defined the weekend with Graham as an event of central importance in his spiritual life: “But that weekend my faith took on new meaning. It was the beginning of a new walk where I would recommit my heart to Jesus Christ.”<sup>86</sup> Thus, Bush narrativized the encounter as the true beginning of his spiritual life. While the development of his faith had its twists and turns, the Pauline conversion narrative provided Bush a way to smooth the contours of his own narrative resulting in one more rhetorically palatable and compelling to the general public. However, a conversion is only as good as the changes it brings in the life of the new convert. Accordingly, we must now examine how Bush employed the commissioning phase of the Pauline conversion narrative in *A Charge to Keep*.

Like the transformation phase, the commissioning phase—wherein the rhetor details the benefits of conversion and discusses his or her new sense of purpose—was

crucial to Bush's conversion narrative as related in *A Charge to Keep*. Bush explained that he was "humbled to learn that God sent His Son to die for a sinner like me" and remarked that because of the experience he "could understand the life-changing powers of faith."<sup>87</sup> The most obvious change in Bush's life was his abandonment of alcohol. Although this decision came nearly a year after his Walker's Point conversion with Billy Graham, Bush conflated the two as if they had occurred simultaneously. Although deliverance from the desire to drink was clearly a benefit derived from his conversion, the third step of Bush's conversion experience (like its Pauline archetype) reflected a special commissioning—God had appointed Bush to fulfill a special purpose.

Of course, no political candidate could specifically say in a major speech, interview, or autobiography that they believed God had appointed them to become president. Yet, when one reads Bush's accounts of the effects of his conversion in *A Charge to Keep*, they read as qualifications on a resume. Bush asserted that although politics could be a "fickle business" his faith enabled him to soar above it:

Yet I build my life on a foundation that will not shift. My faith frees me. Frees me to put the problem of the moment in proper perspective. Frees me to make decisions that others might not like. Frees me to do the right thing even though it may not poll well.<sup>88</sup>

Clearly, Bush argued that his faith provided him with a special skill set including stability, good decision making, and the courage to make decisions regardless of their popularity. He likewise presented these political virtues as both necessary and desirable for American presidents. Even more importantly, one sees that, since God was the initiator of Bush's conversion, it naturally follows that the divine being is also the source of the benefits of Bush's conversion. Thus, Bush implied quite strongly that, as he told

James Robison and other Evangelical leaders in 1998 and 1999, “God wants me to be president.”

### **Bush’s Pauline Conversion Narrative as Political Shibboleth**

It is significant that such a private personal expression of one’s spiritual journey should be juxtaposed with political virtues and mentioned in such an obviously political context. Such a coupling might appear curious were it not for the fact that Bush’s efforts to conform his conversion narrative to the Pauline form can only be explained by an effort to use this religious form to appeal to voters. While some could interpret this finding as the cynical judgment of one who does not really know the president, it may be helpful to turn to David Kuo—a former administration insider who served as Special Assistant to the President from 2001-2003. Kuo, who was the second highest administration official in the White House’s Office of Faith-Based Initiatives, offers this assessment of Bush’s use of his conversion narrative throughout his presidency:

When Christians like me share the stories of how we came to believe in Jesus and what his presence means in our daily lives, it is called a testimony. It is deeply personal, deeply intimate, and shared with fellow Christians as well as with those we hope are open to accepting Jesus. Bush tweaked its purpose—he was using it to encourage Christians to accept him.<sup>89</sup>

As Kuo suggests, this religious rhetorical form gave Bush the rhetorical tools necessary to appeal to a vast swath of his electoral base.

On Election Day in 2000, Bush carried the evangelical Christian vote in stunning fashion to the tune of sixty-eight percent.<sup>90</sup> Just as Bush’s now famous reference to “Christ” as his favorite political philosopher in the Iowa Republican primary debate in December of 1999 generated copious applause, it appears that evangelical Christians across the nation erupted in approval and acceptance of Bush’s transformation as enacted

by his use of the Pauline conversion narrative. Evangelicals appeared, in a Burkean sense of “identification and consubstantiality,” to have become convinced that Bush was one of their own. This degree of consubstantiality has remained quite durable in light of the fact that Bush increased his dominant command of the evangelical vote by ten percentage points capturing seventy-eight percent of it in the 2004 campaign.<sup>91</sup>

Perhaps the best evidence of the degree to which Bush’s Pauline conversion shibboleth was accepted can be seen in a moment the Bush campaign would rather have forgotten. On November 2, 2000 news finally broke about Bush’s 1976 DUI arrest in Kennebunkport, Maine. Bush aides feared that this revelation would damage the credibility they had worked so hard to build up with evangelical Christians. The Bush campaign did not respond to the revelation by fully employing the Pauline conversion narrative. Rather, they chose to allude briefly to the Pauline-like story which had been a prominent rhetorical feature of the campaign since March of 1999. This may have seemed like a peculiar strategy. Why not cast the DUI revelation in full Pauline detail? Having already largely secured the support of evangelical Christians, Bush needed to respond to the allegations in a manner that would hold their support without repelling any non-evangelical voters. Moreover, Bush had to carefully avoid the impression of being “too religious” just days before the election. Had he responded to the allegations with his fully developed Pauline conversion narrative, he would surely have compromised his standing as a candidate able to unite the diverse religious and non-religious constituencies of the Republican Party and the American electorate.

The campaign’s first response came as a statement from Bush himself campaigning in West Allis, Wisconsin that evening. He admitted that the story was

“accurate” and that he was “not proud of that.”<sup>92</sup> Echoing the largely understated transgression language of *A Charge to Keep*, Bush grudgingly acknowledged that “I have oftentimes said that years ago I made some mistakes. I occasionally drank too much and I did on that night.”<sup>93</sup> As in *A Charge to Keep*, the transgression phase proved more muted than Bush’s discussion of his transformation and subsequent commissioning which accompanied it. Alluding to his, by this time, well known conversion story Bush offered that he “learned [his] lesson” and that giving up drinking in 1986 was “the right decision for me to make. . . .”<sup>94</sup> While he did not explicitly mention his commissioning at the press conference in West Allis, Bush had said just days before at a rally in San Jose, California that he had given up drinking years before: “And it wasn’t because of a government program, by the way—in my particular case, because I had a higher call.”<sup>95</sup> Of course, Bush failed to mention that he had waited until a decade after his DUI arrest before he felt the higher call to stop drinking.

In the following days, supporters of George W. Bush were able to make rhetorical use of the transformative orientation of the Pauline conversion narrative. Florida Governor Jeb Bush, among others, defended his brother saying, “Twenty-four years ago, my brother was a different person. . . . he wasn’t ready to be president” he went on to proclaim that Bush had “transformed himself” in the ensuing years.<sup>96</sup> Such explanations coupled with public recollection of Bush’s religious conversion constituted an expedient bit of preemptive rhetorical image restoration mounted with the aid of the transformation and commissioning phases of the Pauline conversion narrative. Despite a theory that Bush’s chief political strategist Karl Rove formulated—that the DUI revelation had kept many evangelical voters away from the polls in 2000—the revelation appears to have had



relatively little discernible effect upon Bush's appeal to religious voters on Election Day.<sup>97</sup> In short, the Bush campaign had used the Pauline conversion narrative to prepare the rhetorical ground so well for such a potentially damaging revelation that its impact upon the campaign was negligible at best. Bush's sermon to Houston's Second Baptist Church and *A Charge to Keep* established a compelling story of redemption and transformation so effectively that Bush was able to make use of it throughout the 2000 campaign and well into his presidency.

While much more analysis of the rhetoric of the Bush administration remains, this chapter has contributed to our understanding of how religious rhetoric is used by presidents and presidential candidates. Specifically, the case of George W. Bush's use of the Pauline conversion narrative suggests that religious rhetorical form is useful—so useful in fact that Bush reconfigured his own personal conversion narrative to fit the parameters of the form. Bush's efforts to do this suggest an important role which religious rhetorical forms may play in American political discourse.

### Notes

1. Quoted in Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 73.
2. Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 68.
3. George W. Bush, *A Charge to Keep: My Journey to the White House* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), 136.
4. David Aikman, *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2004), 69. Blessitt himself relates many of his experiences carrying the cross and meeting and praying with George W. Bush in 1984 on his website. Arthur Blessitt, "Praying with George W. Bush," <http://www.blessitt.com/bush.html> (accessed November 10, 2006).
5. Quoted in Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 63.
6. Adapted from Blessitt's account of the meeting. See Blessitt, "Praying with George W. Bush." This account is also corroborated in Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 63-65; and Aikman, *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush*, 69-72.
7. This is reported to have been the prayer Bush prayed with Blessitt during the meeting that day. Quoted in Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 64.

8. Blessitt, "Praying with George W. Bush."
9. Aristotle, *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 36.
10. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2002), 189.
11. Arthur D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 14; Gerald Peters, *The Mutilating God: Authorship and Authority in the Narrative of Conversion*, (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 31.
12. Quoted in Nock, *Conversion*, 179.
13. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1995), 55.
14. Peters, *The Mutilating God*, 25; Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 392-400.
15. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 392-400.
16. Peter A. Dorsey, *Sacred Estrangement: The Rhetoric of Conversion in Modern American Autobiography*, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993), 18.
17. There is general agreement that conversion—a character's dramatic transformation from one condition to another—has become a standard, and perhaps indispensable, component of modern Western literature from the autobiography to the novel. See Peters, *The Mutilating God*, 4-6. Dorsey provides a thorough analysis of conversion's emergence as a dominant motif in Western literature. See Dorsey, *Sacred Estrangement*, 16-42.
18. American frontier literature such as James Fennimore Cooper's *Last of the Mohicans* and John Filson's account of Daniel Boone's adventures on the Kentucky frontier liken a young man's first violent encounter on the American frontier as a type of conversion experience. In Boone's case, Filson refers to it as his "baptism by combat." Quoted in Richard A. Slotkin, *Regeneration through Violence: The Mythology of the American Frontier 1600-1860*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 22.
19. Although modified to fit the rhetor and occasion, many autobiographies of American southerners since the 1940s are cast in the form of conversion narratives wherein the authors claim to have left behind their racial prejudices in favor of a higher and more enlightened understanding of equality. As Hobson writes, "these writers . . . escape a kind of bondage, flee from the slavery of a closed society, of racial prejudice and restriction, into the liberty of free association, free expression, brotherhood, sisterhood—and freedom from racial guilt." Fred Hobson, *But Now I See: The White Southern Racial Conversion Narrative*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), 5.
20. For a well respected account of the Pauline chronology see John Knox, "The Pauline Chronology." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 58 (1939), 23.
21. Peters, *The Mutilating God*, 122.
22. Peters, *The Mutilating God*, 122.
23. Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 59.
24. Harran thoroughly documents the differences between the conversion accounts of Paul, Augustine, and Luther. See Marilyn J. Harran, *Luther on Conversion: The Early Years* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 15-53.

25. Augustine, *Confessions* trans. Henry Chadwick (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 150.
26. Ernest G. Bormann, *The Force of Fantasy: Restoring the American Dream* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2001), 89.
27. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 209.
28. Bormann, *The Force of Fantasy*, 31.
29. David B. McLennan, "Rhetoric and the Legitimation Process: The Rebirth of Charles Colson." *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 19 (1996): 8.
30. Augustine, *Confessions*, 155.
31. Bormann, *The Force of Fantasy*, 31.
32. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 241.
33. See Susan F. Harding, "Convicted by the Holy Spirit: The Rhetoric of Fundamental Baptist Conversion," *American Ethnologist* 14 (1987): 167-181.
34. Grant Wacker, *Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 58.
35. Charles W. Hedrick, "Paul's Conversion/Call: A Comparative Analysis of the Three Reports in Acts," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 415-432.
36. Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther: An Introduction to His Life and Work* trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 23.
37. Quoted in Patrick Collinson, *The Reformation: A History* (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 8.
38. I Timothy 1: 15-16, Revised Standard Version.
39. See Collinson, *The Reformation*, 56.
40. Ernest Bormann thoroughly documents the use of what he calls the "Pauline conversion fantasy type" in American religious history, particularly in the Puritan era of the 1600s through 1700s and the revivalistic era from the late 1700s through the American Civil War. See Bormann, *The Force of Fantasy*, 7, 31, 86-87, 92, 107-108.
41. Quoted in Perry Miller, *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1956), 227.
42. Patricia Caldwell, *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 10.
43. Charles Colson, *Born Again* (Old Tappan: Chosen Books, 1976), 113.
44. Gregory Spencer makes this point with clarity in his analysis of Malcolm Muggeridge's conversion rhetoric. However, he also concedes that most current literature is "consistent in their focus on instantaneous, dramatic conversions." While Spencer makes little distinction between the lived and narrativized experiences of the protagonists who use the Pauline form it seems important to remember that the two are demonstrable distinct. See Gregory Spencer, "The Rhetoric of Malcolm Muggeridge's Gradual Christian Conversion," *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 18 (1995), 55.

45. Brian R. McGee, "Witnessing and Ethos: The Evangelical Conversion of David Duke," *Western Journal of Communication* 62 (1998), 224.
46. Quoted in Public Broadcasting Service, "The Jesus Factor," *Frontline*, May 20, 2004. (Hereafter cited as "The Jesus Factor").
47. Peter M. Kellett, "Communication in Accounts of Religious Conversion: An Interpretive Phenomenological Account," *The Journal of Communication and Religion* 16 (1993): 71-81.
48. Richard Harvey Brown, "Logics of Discovery as Narratives of Conversion: Rhetorics of Invention in Ethnography, Philosophy, and Astronomy," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 27 (1994), 4.
49. Brown, "Logics of Discovery," 26.
50. Charles J.G. Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Form in Conversion Narratives," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 76 (1990), 160.
51. Griffin, "The Rhetoric of Form in Conversion Narratives," 160.
52. Quoted in Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 107.
53. Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 108.
54. Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 108.
55. Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 109.
56. Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 108; See also Aikman, *A Man of Faith*, 113.
57. Quoted in Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 109.
58. Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 109.
59. Aikman, *A Man of Faith*, 114.
60. Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 38.
61. Quoted in Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush*, 37.
62. Paul Kengor, *God and George W. Bush: A Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004), 24.
63. Quoted in Aikman, *A Man of Faith*, 206.
64. Ian Brodie, "Bush Agonized over Karla Faye's Execution, Book Says: Autobiography Sheds No Light on 'Indiscretions,'" *Ottawa Citizen*, November 16, 1999, A9; Terry Neal, and Lois Romano, "Bush Goes to Iowa with Old Message and New Text," *Washington Post*, November 18, 1999, A14.
65. Daniel Jeffreys, "A Man Called Shrub/Son of Bush Struggles to Escape Mediocre Tag," *Daily Telegraph* (Sydney, Australia), February 22, 2000, 25.
66. William James draws attention to these features and the fact that they make the story more believable in the conversion narrative of Stephen H. Bradley. See James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 189-193.

67. Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 20.
68. George W. Bush, "State of Texas, Office of the Governor: Memorandum, April 3, 1995," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/jesus/readings/chargetokeepmemo.html> (accessed November 10, 2006). (Hereafter cited as "Bush Memo").
69. "Bush Memo."
70. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 133.
71. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 133.
72. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 133, 135.
73. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 133.
74. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 133-134.
75. McLennan, "Rhetoric and the Legitimation Process," 8.
76. Ronald Lee and Matthew H. Barton, "Clinton's Rhetoric of Contrition," in *Images, Scandal, and Communication Strategies of the Clinton Presidency* ed. Robert E. Denton & Rachel L. Holloway (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 219.
77. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 136.
78. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 136.
79. Collinson, *The Reformation*, 8.
80. From Jesus' parables of the vineyard (Matthew 20: 1-16; Mark 12: 1-11; Luke 20:9-17), the four soils (Matthew 13: 1-23; Mark 4: 3-9; Luke 8: 5-8), and the mustard seed (Matthew 13: 31-32; Mark 4: 31-32; Luke 13: 18-19) to Paul's description of Christians as "ingrafted branches" (Romans 11: 11-24) the New Testament is rife with allusions to horticulture and husbandry. The parable of the mustard seed is among the most well known of Jesus' parables. See also Matthew 17: 20-21.
81. The fundraiser took place in Fort Myers, Florida in June of 1999. See Blessitt, "Praying with George W. Bush."
82. Bush discussed each of these instances in his spiritual development throughout the pages of *A Charge to Keep*. Especially see pages 132-139.
83. Author Mickey Herskowitz was originally hired to write the biography but was fired by the Bush campaign in September of 1999. While the reasons for Herskowitz's firing are unclear the Bush campaign claimed he had failed to deliver the manuscript when promised by July of 1999. Other sources claimed that Herskowitz was let go because the Bush campaign was unhappy with the manuscript's content. R.G. Ratcliffe, "Bush's Book Slams Some Journalists Who Dig in his Past," *Houston Chronicle* November 15, 1999, A8.
84. William Martin, "Mighty Mission; Billy Graham's Remarkable Impact on Religion in American Life," *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, May 11, 2003, G1.
85. Quoted in Arthur Blessitt, "Turned on to Jesus," <http://www.blessitt.com/books/turned4.html> (accessed November 10, 2006).
86. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 136.

87. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 136.
88. Bush, *A Charge to Keep*, 6.
89. David Kuo, *Tempting Faith: An Inside Story of Political Seduction*, (New York, NY: Free Press, 2006), 125.
90. Pew Research Center, "Religion and the Presidential Vote: Bush's Gains Broad-Based, December 6, 2004," <http://people-press.org/commentary/display.php3?AnalysisID=103> (accessed February 2, 2008).
91. Pew Research Center, "Religion and the Presidential Vote."
92. "George W. Bush Answers Questions about his DUI Arrest in 1976, November 2, 2000," <http://www.transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0011/02/se.08.html> (accessed November 7, 2006). (Hereafter cited as "George W. Bush Answers.")
93. "George W. Bush Answers."
94. "George W. Bush Answers."
95. "Bush Acknowledges 1976 DUI Charge, November 2, 2000," <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/11/02/bush.dui/index.html> (accessed November 7, 2006).
96. "Jeb Bush Defends Brother on TV," 7A.
97. Rove's theory that approximately 4 million evangelicals stayed away from the polls in 2000 because of the DUI story has, as far as I can ascertain, never been independently verified. However, the Pew Research Center's finding that Bush received an additional ten percent of the evangelical vote in 2004 does lend some credibility to it. See Pew Research Center, "Bush's Gains Broad-Based." For additional analysis of Rove's calculation see Public Broadcasting Service, "Karl Rove—The Architect," *Frontline*, April 12, 2005.

## **CHAPTER VIII**

### **CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS**

From Plato, to Rousseau, to the contemporary efforts of Robert Bellah and Roderick Hart; scholars have long sought to better understand the discursive relationship between religion and politics. This dissertation is certainly not the final word on the subject. Nevertheless, it does offer an alternative approach to understanding this dynamic nexus that is very much a part of American political culture. This chapter outlines the major findings of the dissertation, discusses the normative considerations inherent to this topic, briefly notes the limitations of the dissertation, and cautiously considers the future political and scholarly prospects of religious rhetorical forms and their employment as political shibboleths.

#### **Major Findings**

How do contemporary American presidents employ the rhetorical resources of religion? While they certainly employ religious discourse in many ways, this investigation of the last five American presidents suggests that religious rhetorical form is one of these methods of using religious language in the political realm. As illustrated by chapter II and the various case studies explored, contemporary scholarship is yet to recognize the variety of ways in which presidents use such religious rhetorical forms. Moreover, this dissertation has shown that contemporary presidential discourse does indeed include religious rhetorical patterns which can aid presidents by helping them identify with the public. These religious rhetorical forms act as shibboleths which derive

their rhetorical value from the fact that they address the mythical needs of the American populace via discursive patterns with a rich cultural and intellectual history.

Religious rhetoric in American presidential discourse is thus a far more complex phenomenon than simply the use of a “God strategy” or religious code words heard and understood only by religious segments of the electorate—a phenomenon sometimes referred to as “dog whistle politics.”<sup>1</sup> Although some specific nuances of religious discourse are undoubtedly understandable only to certain groups, religious rhetorical forms are full of meanings for complex and variegated national audiences. This finding about the potentially broad appeal of religious forms suggests that religious rhetorical form is a more salient feature of American political rhetoric than previous scholarship has recognized. The existence of religious discursive patterns operating within political rhetoric (other than the jeremiad) is in itself a significant contribution to the existing scholarship. This dissertation supports earlier findings that religious rhetoric is a significant element of American presidential rhetoric; but it has also uncovered a variety of ways in which religion is ritualistically inserted into our political discourse by way of rhetorical forms.

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from this examination of religious rhetorical forms used by those who have occupied the modern White House is perhaps also the most obvious. Religious rhetorical forms such as the ones profiled in this dissertation are (for good or ill) a vibrant aspect of contemporary American presidential rhetoric. This claim arises from a careful reading of the many presidential texts explored within this dissertation. While it is perhaps not surprising that religious form presents itself in campaign discourse as a way for candidates to appeal to voters, it is quite



noteworthy that religious rhetorical forms find their way into an array of additional discourses of contemporary presidents—discourses on the economy, the national budget, the state of the relationship between the people and their government, and war. The diverse array of rhetorical sites at which religious rhetorical forms are used tells us that such forms are potentially useful tools of the rhetorical presidency; however, the more intriguing finding is why this is so. This dissertation suggests that religious discursive patterns have significant potential for inter-textuality. Literary critics Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson observe the inter-textuality of religious mythologies from ancient East Asia and Mesopotamia which found their way into the narrative structures of the Bible thereby exercising profound influence upon the form and content of Judaism and Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Frye also found that religious mythical structures were quite useful things for political leaders seeking the loyalty and consent of the populations over which they ruled:

Thus the Christian myth of providence, after a battle, is often invoked by the winning side in a way which makes its truth of secondary importance. The storm that wrecked the Spanish Armada was a providential event to the English, but a natural event to the Spaniards. Elizabeth I issued a medal quoting the Psalms, ‘God breathed with his winds, and they were scattered;’ Philip of Spain said to the survivors: ‘I sent you forth to fight with men, not with the elements.’<sup>3</sup>

Strictly speaking, the proclamation of God’s providence in the Psalm and the battle with the Spanish Armada in the English Channel had absolutely nothing to do with each other historically or hermeneutically. Yet, religious language and imagery are so rhetorically malleable as to minimize the necessary inferential leap—such is the power of the inter-textuality of religious form. As Barry Brummett notes, “That is the role of homology: not

to unite what is already the same, but to link disparate orders of experience by way of the same form.”<sup>4</sup>

The importance of these discursive patterns is also apparent in the way that presidents will sometimes go to great lengths in order to conform more closely to the rhetorical form. As revealed in chapter VII, for example, George W. Bush highlighted some aspects of his conversion story and minimized others in order to conform more closely to the Pauline conversion narrative in several important rhetorical moments during his 2000 presidential campaign—particularly in his campaign biography *A Charge to Keep*.

Although political shibboleths can be tuned or targeted to a particular religious political constituency, this dissertation has demonstrated that a political shibboleth is often much more. The mythological nature of the rhetorical forms employed suggests that, for instance, when George W. Bush spoke of giving up drinking because of “a higher call”<sup>5</sup> evangelical Christians certainly understood the familiar religious implication. Yet, the notion of deep personal transformation—which comprises the mythological core of the Pauline conversion narrative form—is sufficiently well understood by non-religious audiences such that the primary message of transformation inherent to the form is not lost upon a general audience.

The same can be said for the renewal theme which comprised the mythical core Bill Clinton’s use of the deliverance form. Both the prospect of collective national forgiveness and reinvigoration from a shameful chapter in national history as was found in George H. W. Bush’s atonement form; and the hope of national restoration evident in the postmillennial jeremiad of Ronald Reagan offered similar comfort to the rhetorically

constituted mass public of the American populace. Even the condemnatory mythological core of Jimmy Carter's moralistic jeremiad was, to the detriment of his presidency, recognizable to the mass American public. In his jeremiad the public heard the echoes of a scolding prophet—and they did not appreciate the message.

These examples suggest that religious rhetorical forms do indeed speak to the mythically needs of rhetorically constituted publics as proposed in chapter II. If convinced that its national status has declined, what national public would not collectively long for the type of national restoration promised by Ronald Reagan? If many within the country accept the premise that we are living in dark times of peril and distress, what nation would not want to hold firmly to a political leader who promises the renewal of a great nation and a deliverance from the national peril as Bill Clinton did throughout his 1992 campaign speeches and in his 1995 State of the Union Address? Of course, the American public hardly subscribes to such visions in a wholesale manner. Yet, it is intriguing to notice that each of the religious forms explored within this dissertation contains not just a religious pattern of discourse with a long history, but a basic principle (such as transformation, atonement, renewal) that, on its own, nearly any American would accept. As suggested by my use of the term *shibboleth*, these forms foster a type of Burkean identification, but at the collective rather than the purely individual level. Presidents who use these or other similar religious rhetorical forms have the potential to be seen as being consubstantial, or 'one of us'—the heart of identification in the manner Burke conceptualizes it—with the larger American public. My claim is not that the American public is inherently religious at its core, but that these patterns contain sufficient cultural familiarity and mythological depth as to help presidents identify with

and satisfy the public's need for myths of transformation, atonement, renewal, and the like. Given this finding, future explorations of the American public sphere should examine the way that the need for collective myths may influence the rhetorical and political choices made by the electorate and those who covet their support.

At the theoretical level, this dissertation demonstrates the validity of religious rhetorical form as a way of understanding the relationship between religious and political discourse in contemporary presidential rhetoric. I do not claim that either Robert Bellah's notion of civil religion or Roderick Hart's contract of civic piety lack conceptual validity. On the contrary, both have been helpful perspectives on the dynamic rhetorical intersection of religion and politics. Nevertheless, both of these perspectives seem wanting in the face of how religion has been used in the contemporary presidency—at least for the eight presidential campaigns and the five presidents of the United States between 1976 and 2000.<sup>6</sup> I propose that exploration of religion in presidential politics via the approach of religious rhetorical form is valuable because it provides a conceptually nuanced understanding of the phenomenon.

This study also provides additional clarification of the ongoing scholarly conversation about the relationship between form and genre in two important ways. First, this dissertation gives more definition to the concept of rhetorical form by explaining how religious rhetorical forms are recognizable patterns of discourse, with intellectual histories, that address the mythical needs of rhetorically-constituted publics. This clarification is an improvement upon prior studies of rhetorical forms such as the jeremiad, which tend to focus only upon the discursive pattern itself. Second, this dissertation suggests that form transcends genre—at least in the context of the American

presidency. This finding is illustrated most clearly in the exploration of Bill Clinton's use of the deliverance form in chapter VI. Clinton found the form to be equally useful in his 1992 campaign for the presidency in 1992, in his 1993 and 1997 inaugural messages, and in his 1995 State of the Union Address. Defined by the metaphor of the "new covenant," Clinton portrayed himself as a political centrist who could rescue the nation from gridlock and despair. Inaugurals, state of the union speeches, and campaign addresses are, of course, distinctive genres of presidential rhetoric each with their own unique demands and expectations. Yet, as the Clinton case study illustrates, the deliverance form was adequate to the task of promising renewal in each of these different situations. This finding suggests that additional scholarship should explore the interaction between genre and form in order to determine if other rhetorical forms can transcend genre in the same way as the forms explored in this dissertation.

While religious rhetorical forms may be useful to American presidents, they can also become problematic on several democratic and political levels. First, religious rhetorical forms employed while articulating domestic or foreign policies can short-circuit any sort of meaningful deliberation. Ronald Reagan's Oval Office Address on July 27, 1981 in support of the Economic Recovery and Tax Act (ERTA) of 1981 is perhaps the clearest example of this. The ERTA which Reagan championed was one of several proposals designed to stimulate the economy. Yet it was more aggressive than any of the other measures proposed, including across-the-board tax cuts by five percent in 1981, and ten percent in both 1982 and 1983.<sup>7</sup> When he spoke to the nation that July night, Reagan framed support of his measure as a moral American imperative by casting the choice in a distinctively jeremiadic fashion:

In a few days the Congress will stand at the fork of two roads. One road is all too familiar to us. It leads ultimately to higher taxes. It merely brings us back to the source of our economic problems, where the government decides that it knows better than you what should be done with your earnings and, in fact, how you should conduct your life. The other road promises to renew the American spirit. It's a road of hope and opportunity. It places the direction of your life back in your hands where it belongs. . . . In these 6 months, we've done so much and have come so far. It's been the power of millions of people like you who have determined that we will make America great again. You have made the difference up to now. You will make the difference again. Let us not stop now.<sup>8</sup>

Reagan's speech was a smashing political and rhetorical success. As thousands of telephone calls and letters supporting Reagan's position streamed into the White House, his political opposition from House Democrats virtually melted away and the legislation was passed within days. While this episode could be viewed as just a simple instance of an American president using the available rhetorical resources in support of a political effort, even the staunchest supporters of Reagan must admit that his use of the potent jeremiad form enabled him to bypass any further debate with the Congress on the legislation.

As profiled in chapter V, George H.W. Bush used the appealing religious rhetorical form of atonement to stifle public debate over whether or not to take the nation to war with Iraq in response to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. Time and again Bush dismissed the concerns of war protestors by saying that, in contrast to the political divisions of the Vietnam War, there could now be no mistaking "what Americans think"<sup>9</sup> about the war. While the presidential strategy of "going public"<sup>10</sup> is a common feature of the modern presidency, there is something insidious (but often effective) about publicly using religious forms to muzzle dissenting voices—particularly those of average citizens. Thus, one of the dangers of religious rhetorical form in presidential rhetoric is that the

implicit moral authority—or “pastoral power” as Michel Foucault calls it—of such forms can stifle the vigorous debates so necessary to a healthy democracy.<sup>11</sup>

Religious rhetorical forms may present another danger—one more immediate to American presidents themselves. The type of certainty which often comes with the use of religious form makes it exceedingly difficult for a president to reconsider a previously-held position when either wisdom or political desirability indicate that a change may be necessary. For instance, Jimmy Carter found himself the victim of his own dire jeremiad. As profiled in chapter III, Carter not only blamed himself and the nation collectively for national problems, but then promised bold action and failed to deliver it. By projecting the energy crisis in such stark moralistic terms, Carter set rhetorical and policy making standards that were too high for himself and his administration.

George H. W. Bush also found himself to be a victim of his own use of religious rhetorical form. As the Persian Gulf War was ending with the obvious military success of the American-led coalition, Bush proudly proclaimed that the nation had destroyed the doubts and anxieties left over in the public consciousness of the Vietnam era. As he said in a radio address to the U.S. military as the war was ending: “The specter of Vietnam has been buried forever in the desert sands of the Arabian Peninsula.”<sup>12</sup> Yet, Bush found that his future foreign policy decisions about Iraq—particularly with regard to the controversial decision not to support the Kurdish and Shiite rebellions with military force—continued to be constrained by the specter of Vietnam. Bush’s oft-repeated pledge that Iraq would not be another Vietnam essentially tied his own hands and precluded any further policy changes—even ones which might have further undermined Saddam Hussein’s hold on power in Iraq.

### **Normative Considerations**

No thorough treatment of the rhetorical intersection of religion and politics would be complete without at least some discussion of the normative concerns inherent to this subject. Few scholars or American citizens would be troubled by the fact that a president may be (as many of them have been) personally religious. Yet many have justly raised concerns about the proclivity American presidents have for integrating religion into their political discourse. For one thing, the First Amendment's disestablishment clause and Article Six of the Constitution provide that religious faith and practice can be neither officially endorsed by the government nor used as a test for office-seekers. Any sort of official "wall of separation" (to use Thomas Jefferson's words) is complicated, and perhaps even compromised, by the invocations by clergy prior to inaugurations and the daily work of Congress. The increasing complexity of both American society and religion present further problems when American presidents use religious language in ways that appear to be endorsements of a particular faith or denomination. During one speech touting his faith-based initiatives program in 2002, George W. Bush held up a Bible he had borrowed from one of the audience members and proclaimed it to be "a universal handbook" and "a good go-by" for childcare programs receiving federal funds.<sup>13</sup> Bush's open declaration that faith should be a deciding factor for organizations who receive federal funds raises issues about the use of religious rhetoric in presidential discourse based on pluralistic grounds. How can the person who is arguably the most visible representative of the nation and is a definer of the national identity,<sup>14</sup> speak about religion in a way that is complimentary of his or her own while still respectful of the diversity of American society? Although this difficult question is beyond the scope of this



dissertation, it is an important consideration about religious expression in politics which will remain within the public consciousness for years to come.

Humanities scholar Wendy Olmsted observes that the absolutist character inherent to religion itself “often seeks truth as distinguished from mere verisimilitude or probability.”<sup>15</sup> This quality of religion leads to other problems when employed by American presidents who must not only engage in deliberation with political adversaries, but must navigate the notoriously uncertain waters of domestic and foreign policymaking. “The difficulty of mixing religion with politics . . .,” writes rhetorical scholar James A. Aune “is that it requires one to believe that one’s opponent is not merely mistaken, but evil. . . . [I]t can be remarkably powerful in mobilizing people for action, yet it is extremely corrosive of democratic politics, since it undermines the possibility of a loyal opposition.”<sup>16</sup> Even Richard John Neuhaus, who believes that religion ought to play an important role in public deliberation, admits that: “When it is the Lord’s battle you are fighting, politics takes on an aura of deadly earnestness.”<sup>17</sup>

Although the use of religion in politics can be problematic for these and other reasons, one should consider if the use of religion, particularly religious rhetorical form, in the public sphere need be so harmful? In order to engage this question it is necessary to turn to American rhetorical history which, although beyond the immediate scope of this dissertation, is full of instances whereupon religious language and religious rhetorical form played a vital role in the advancement of American society. The earliest rhetoric of the abolitionist movement was deeply imbued with the idea that human slavery was not only an affront to man but to God as well. Black abolitionist David Walker—a rhetorical precursory to later better known figures such as Henry Highland Garnett and William

Lloyd Garrison—pricked the consciences of northerners and southerners with his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*. Walker’s modified jeremiad<sup>18</sup> contained numerous prophetic injunctions against the people of America for allowing slavery in Americans hypocritically claimed to be a Christian nation. Walker seized upon the hypocrisy of a political establishment that perpetuated slavery in the face of its defining political document which claimed that all were created equal:

See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you understand your own language? Hear your own language, proclaimed to the world, July 4<sup>th</sup> 1776—‘We hold these truths to be self-evident—that ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL!! that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness!! Compare your own language above,. . . with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us—men who have never given your fathers or you the least provocation!!!’<sup>19</sup>

While the proponents of slavery such as the Reverend Thornton Stringfellow also claimed that God was on their side of the slavery debate,<sup>20</sup> there can be little doubt that religious arguments and rhetorical forms were powerful weapons in opposition to slavery.

One should also look to the soul-stirring oratory of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. for an example of the powerful potential of religious rhetoric and religious rhetorical form in public affairs. King’s famous “I Have a Dream” and “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” addresses are not only beautiful artifacts of American rhetorical history, they are prime examples of religious rhetorical form—a harsh, but hopeful jeremiad in the case of “I Have a Dream” and an example of what rhetorical analyst Thomas Rosteck calls “the exodus narrative” in “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop.”<sup>21</sup> These powerful instances of religious rhetorical form helped American society advance toward that day—regrettably still too far off—where all are treated as they should be in socio-political custom and law.

One should also not overlook the religious character of the compelling arguments advanced for suffrage and women's rights. In 1837 Sarah M. Grimke responded to the Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts who admonished her for speaking to mixed audiences of men and women (promiscuous) in the name of ending slavery. Grimke called upon the rhetorical resources of religion to argue that the "doctrine of dependence upon man is utterly at variance with the doctrine of the Bible. In that book I find nothing like the softness of woman, nor the sternness of man: both are equally commanded to bring forth the fruits of the Spirit, love, meekness, gentleness, &c."<sup>22</sup> Physician, suffragist, renowned lecturer, and ordained Methodist minister Anna Howard Shaw used a jeremiad challenging the nation to live up to its republican ideals in her famous speech "The Fundamental Principle of a Republic." Like David Walker, Shaw used this form to point out the nation's hypocrisy in proclaiming itself a republic when it was obvious that not all of the citizens could vote for their representatives. This hypocrisy was a violation not only of the meaning of a republic, but of what America itself claimed to be. Shaw quipped: "We might call ourselves angels, but that wouldn't make us angels, you have got to be an angel before you are an angel, and you have got to be a Republic before you are a Republic."<sup>23</sup> Shaw's use of this form allowed her to articulate with clarity the position that full suffrage for both women and men was the only way the nation could be at harmony with itself and with the natural order of the world: "Men and women must go through this world together from the cradle to the grave; it is God's way and the fundamental principle of a Republican form of government."<sup>24</sup>

The reform impulse of what has become known as the American Progressive Era owes at least some of its success to the influence of postmillennial rhetoric. Although not

a religious rhetorical form in its own right, postmillennialism (as noted in chapter IV) inspired reformers with a vision of a better world achievable by responsible governmental action and the good works of conscience performed by individuals and groups whether religious or secular.

Taken together these examples indicate that it is possible for religious rhetoric generally and religious rhetorical form in particular to interact with the public sphere in ways which are helpful to American society. However, the perceptive reader will notice a difference between these examples and the instances of religious rhetorical form explored within this dissertation. None of these occurred within the confines of the American presidency or any other form of government. This fact certainly does not mean that such a use of religious or religiously-oriented rhetorical form could not be or has not been used to good societal ends by an American president. Indeed, President Lyndon B. Johnson's use of the war metaphor, which is often laden with religious elements such as the concept of an ultimate battle between good and evil, was quite useful in helping his administration combat poverty.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Robert Bellah cited extensively from the presidential speeches of John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson to support his civil religion thesis. Nevertheless, the case studies profiled here reveal that religious forms as used in the contemporary presidency are often rhetorical tools used by presidents to help them enact their political agendas. Could it be, as Aune suggests, that the use of religious form in political discourse is inherently corrosive because it automatically precludes any possibility of deliberation or compromise? While this interpretation is seductive, particularly with regard to religious forms employed in the context of war, I posit that

there are certain aspects of the contemporary American presidency which make the use of religious rhetorical form less constructive and more partisan.

The agonistic character of the contemporary presidency appears to be a particularly significant difference between the way presidents use religion as contrasted with the way American socio-political movements have historically used such rhetoric. While the founders certainly designed American government to operate under something of an adversarial model, they certainly could not have envisioned the explosion of technology and media that has given rise to the twenty-four hour news cycle. Nor did they envision the tremendous political power that would reside within the office and the person who holds it.<sup>26</sup> Although any presidency is an institution comprised of people who believe they are working in the best interest of the nation, it is also a partisan institution headed by an ambitious individual. As noted in the chapters profiling Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush, and Bill Clinton, contemporary presidents seem willing to use nearly any means necessary to achieve their objectives. It is not so much that presidents seek to use religious rhetoric in hopes of corrupting it or the institution of the presidency—they simply use it because it is available and generally effective. Certainly religious rhetoric as used by some presidents can be corrosive to democratic politics, but I contend that it is the hyper-competitive, agonistic character of the contemporary presidency that inherently corrupts presidential discourse rather than the fact that such discourse is influenced by religious rhetorical form. Religious form can be corruptive, but it is the manner of use rather than the religious character of the form that is inherently corruptive to political deliberation in this country.

### **Limitations**

As with any study, this analysis has its limitations. First, its findings are somewhat limited by the scope of presidential rhetoric it explores. Future explorations of religious rhetorical form in American politics could expand upon the present study by looking to presidents outside the period of 1976-2000. Future scholarship could examine the use of religious rhetorical form in political institutions aside from the presidency such as the Congress or the judiciary. This study is also somewhat limited by its orientation toward rhetorical form. Although part of my objective was to explore the degree to which religion operates within the rhetorical presidency by way of religious rhetorical form, it is important to note that these rhetorical forms are not the only way in which it does so. Narratives, metaphors, prayers and the like are also ways in which religious rhetoric manifests within the American presidency and other forms of political rhetoric.

### **Future Scholarship and the Future of Religion in American Politics**

As of this writing, religious rhetoric and many elements of religious rhetorical form have already begun to play a prominent role in the 2008 presidential election. In the summer of 2007, the Cable News Network (CNN) held a forum on the subject of faith in politics with all of the leading Democratic presidential candidates—John Edwards, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton. Each of the contenders discussed their respective experiences with religion. John Edwards and Hillary Clinton both claimed that faith had gotten them through painful personal crises such as the loss of Edwards' son and Clinton's very public marital difficulties. Obama was less personal and seemed more public-minded, invoking faith to challenge the war in Iraq and to address domestic issues such as education and crime.<sup>27</sup> In the early months of the campaign Obama likened his

candidacy and the ongoing struggle for civil rights in the United States by directly referencing the deliverance form with his proclamation that he and his colleagues were members of the “Joshua generation.”<sup>28</sup>

Republicans, too, have sought to employ similar shibboleths. The quintessential example has been the presidential candidacy of former Arkansas Governor (and Southern Baptist minister) Mike Huckabee. Huckabee’s appeal to religious conservatives is largely grounded in his willingness (like George W. Bush) to share his personal religious testimony. Huckabee’s expressions of religion go further than Bush’s since he has spoken at length about his views on the controversy between science and religion and offers a more nuanced discussion of how his Christian faith informs his political positions.<sup>29</sup> Former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney also engaged the subject of religion during the 2008 presidential race—but undoubtedly not in the manner he wanted to. Persistent questions about his Mormon faith from religious conservatives within his own Republican Party, and concerns that he would be unable to build an effective electoral coalition which included them once the primaries began, prompted Romney to deliver a speech entitled “Faith in America” in College Station, Texas on December 6, 2007. “I am an American running for President,” Romney explained “I do not define my candidacy by my religion. A person should not be elected because of his faith nor should he be rejected because of his faith.”<sup>30</sup> Romney’s speech—quite reminiscent of John F. Kennedy’s engagement of the subject of his Catholic faith in his “Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Alliance” in 1960—lauded the importance of religion in public life, but reaffirmed the basic American value of religious tolerance. The political considerations which prompted Romney to engage public prejudices about his religion indicate that, for

good or ill, many Americans look to the personal religion and religious expressions of political candidates as a potential source of identification.

Beyond individual candidates, religion and religious discourse became part of the cultural context of the 2008 campaign. Indeed, a Christian website ([beliefnet.com](http://beliefnet.com)) dedicated to exploring how religious issues interact with the American public sphere created the “God-o-Meter” which “scientifically” measures a candidate’s “rate of God-talk.”<sup>31</sup> Despite the sketchy details of the God-o-Meter’s methodology, the very presence of such an interactive website indicates that religious rhetorical elements are very much a part of the 2008 presidential contest and that there is a degree of popular public fascination with the phenomenon.

It is impossible to know precisely what role religious rhetorical form will have in future presidential elections or administrations. Yet, in light of the findings of this dissertation it is safe to project that the use of religious forms as political shibboleths will continue for the foreseeable future. Although I have offered some normative judgments of the phenomenon in this concluding chapter, I am generally reticent to claim that such discourse is either inherently good or bad. Like any other form of communication, the morality of such rhetoric is dependent upon the intentions of the rhetor, the characteristics of the discourse, and the ultimate results of the message. My primary aim has been to show that a variety of religious rhetorical forms exist as an important component of American presidential discourse. With this premise established, there is now much scholarly work to be done. Scholars of American public address should explore the rhetorical forms (religious and otherwise) which exist within our politics. They should also consider why they appear to speak to so many Americans at the mythological level.



Explorations of how our political discourse is informed by rhetorical forms (religious or secular) and the implications of these forms upon not only the presidency but all other components of our government and society will present scholars with daunting tasks for years to come. Yet, these important endeavors will ultimately prove to be worth our efforts.

### Notes

1. David Domke and Kevin Coe discuss this technique as a part of what they call “the God strategy.” They conceptualize the use of religious language as “Targeted, under-the-radar messages [which] denote who is part of the club. It’s like a secret handshake, writ large and electoral: politicians who narrowcast religious cues are assigned considerable credibility by voters in the targeted constituency.” David Domke and Kevin Coe, *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 97. Some journalists have recently taken to calling the use of code words or phrases designed to elicit a particular response from certain groups “dog whistle politics.” See Peter Baker, “‘Just a Comma’ Becomes Part of Iraq Debate; Opponents See Bush’s Words on War as Insensitive or as a Code for Religious Right,” *Washington Post* October 5, 2006, A19; Andrew Grice, “‘Dog-whistle’ Style of Politics Attacked by Conservatives,” *Independent (London)* October 3, 2007, 4; Wayne Crawford, “With Faith in Politics,” *Hobart Mercury (Australia)* December 23, 2006, 33.
2. Northrop Frye and Jay Macpherson, *Biblical and Classical Myths: The Mythological Framework of Western Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 202-208, 212-219.
3. Northrop Frye, *The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 16.
4. Barry Brummett, *Rhetorical Homologies: Form, Culture, Experience* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2004), 5-6.
5. “Bush Acknowledges 1976 DUI Charge, November 2, 2000,” <http://archives.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/11/02/bush.dui/index.html> (accessed November 7, 2006).
6. See chapter II for a detailed discussion of the problems with civil religion and the contract of civic piety as theoretical approaches to understanding the rhetorical intersection of religion and politics.
7. Reagan was ultimately forced to recoup some of this lost revenue by raising taxes in 1982, 1983 and 1984 in order to prevent the already substantial budget deficit from reaching catastrophic levels. See John W. Sloan, “The Economic Costs of Reagan Mythology,” In *Deconstructing Reagan: Conservative Mythology and America’s Fortieth President* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 2007), 41-69.
8. Ronald Reagan, “Address to the Nation on Federal Tax Reduction Legislation, July 27, 1981,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: Ronald Reagan-1981* (United States Government Printing Office, Washington, DC: 1982), 668.
9. George Bush, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, January 28, 1991,” *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 72.

10. Kernell discusses Reagan's ERTA speech and many other instances of presidential leadership bypassing the deliberative process by going public. See Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington: CQ Press, 1997), 167-171, 179-207.
11. Foucault explains that the use of language replete with moral authority is one of the primary modes of political power. He writes that "the model for the art of government is that of God imposing his laws upon his creatures." See Michel Foucault, "'Omnes Et Singulatim': Toward a Critique of Political Reason," in *Michel Foucault: Power vol. 3* ed. James D. Faubion trans. Robert Hurley et.al. (New York: The New Press, 1994), 315. Also see pp. 298-317.
12. George Bush, "Radio Address to United States Armed Forces Stationed in the Persian Gulf Region, March 2, 1991," *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States: George Bush—1991 Book I—January 1 to June 30, 1991* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1992), 207.
13. Quoted in Public Broadcasting Service, "The Jesus Factor," *Frontline*, May 20, 2004.
14. Mary Stuckey, *The President as Interpreter-in-Chief* (Chatham: Chatham House Publishers, 1991), 1. These questions and themes about presidential definition of the public are also addressed quite thoroughly by Vanessa Beasley. See Vanessa Beasley, *You, The People: American National Identity in Presidential Rhetoric* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2004), 1-23, 37-45. See also Michael Novak, "President of All the People," in *Who Belongs in America?: Presidents, Rhetoric, and Immigration* ed. Vanessa Beasley (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006), 19-36.
15. Wendy Olmsted, "Invention, Emotion, and Conversion in Augustine's Confessions," in *Rhetorical Invention & Religious Inquiry: New Perspectives*, ed. Walter Jost and Wendy Olmsted (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 65.
16. James A. Aune, "The Argument from Evil in the Rhetoric of Reaction," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 6 (2003), 520.
17. Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1984), 8.
18. David Walker modified the jeremiad form with considerably less emphasis upon America's ability to save itself from divine judgment by altering its course. See David C. Bailey, "The Prophet of Abolition: Ambiguous Prophecy and Rhetorical Echoes in the Rhetoric of David Walker's *Appeal*," in *Sizing up Rhetoric*, ed. David Zarefsky and Elizabeth Benacka (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2008), 313-324.
19. Quoted in Peter P. Hinks, *David Walker's Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 78-79.
20. Stringfellow's primary religious arguments in favor of slavery were that (1) The institution had been sanctioned by God throughout the Old and New Testaments, (2) That Jesus never once contradicted God's sanction of slavery in the Old Testament, and (3) Slavery was inherently merciful because those who are made slaves would probably have been killed otherwise or taken as slaves by another nation. See Thornton Stringfellow, The University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, Documenting the American South "Scriptural and Statistical Views in Favor of Slavery," <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/string/string.html> (accessed January 7, 2008).
21. See Thomas Rosteck, "Narrative in Martin Luther King's *I've Been to the Mountaintop*," *Southern Communication Journal* 58 (1992): 22-32.
22. Sarah M. Grimke, "Response to the Pastoral Letter of the General Association of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts," in *American Rhetorical Discourse 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.*, ed. Ronald F. Reid and James F. Klumpp (Long Grove: Waveland Press, 2005), 322.

23. Anna Howard Shaw, "The Fundamental Principle of a Republic," <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/annashawrepublic.htm> ¶ 5 (accessed January 7, 2008).
24. Shaw, "The Fundamental Principle of a Republic," ¶ 39.
25. See David Zarefsky, *President Johnson's War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 92-119.
26. Madison said that Congress would be the strongest branch since "the legislative authority necessarily dominates" in a Republic. See James Madison, "Federalist No. 51," in *The Federalist Papers* ed. Charles R. Kesler and Clinton Rossiter (New York: Penguin Group, 2003), 319.
27. See Patrick Healy and Michael Luo, "Edwards, Clinton and Obama Describe Journeys of Faith," *New York Times* June 5, 2007, A1.
28. See Brian DeBose, "Unity of Blacks Lacking on Obama: Sharpton Has Doubts on Civil Rights Devotion," *Washington Times* March 14, 2007, A04.
29. See Mike Huckabee, *From Hope to Higher Ground: 12 STOPS to Restoring America's Greatness* (Center Street Publishers, 2007), 101-110. See also David Jackson, "Huckabee Builds Evangelical Support; Rising Poll Numbers Haven't Translated into Big Fundraising," *USA Today* November 5, 2007, 6A.
30. Mitt Romney, "Faith in America, December 6, 2007," <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mittromneyfaithinamerica.htm> (accessed February 13, 2008).
31. Beliefnet, "The God-o-Meter: A Scientific Measure of God Talk in the Elections," <http://blog.beliefnet.com/godometer/> (accessed January 12, 2008).

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